



# Black Notes on Asia: Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013

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*Black Notes on Asia:  
Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American  
Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013*

A dissertation presented  
by

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to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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African American Studies

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Abstract

*Black Notes on Asia: Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013* sheds new light on the hitherto neglected engagements of African American writers and thinkers with various literary, cultural, and artistic traditions of Asia. Starting with a reevaluation of Lewis G. Alexander's transcultural remaking of haiku in 1923, this dissertation interrogates and revises the familiar *interracial* (read as "black-white") terms of the African American struggle for freedom and equality. While critics have long taken for granted these terms as the sine qua non of the African American literary imagination and practice, this dissertation demonstrates how authors like Alexander defied not only the implicit dichotomy of black-and-white but also the critical bias that represents African American literature as a nationally segregated tradition distinctly cut off from cultural sources beyond the border of the United States and made legible only within its narrowly racialized and racializing contexts.

More specifically, *Black Notes on Asia* argues that the ruling conceptions of the

so-called “Harlem Renaissance in black and white” and the reductive understanding of the Black Arts Movement as an uncomplicated, propagandistic expression of black nationalism, fail to pay due attention to their underlying multiracial, multicultural, or transnational aesthetics and perspectives. In order to understand the full complexity and heterogeneity of the African American imagination from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, it is necessary to account for cultural ebbs and flows, echoes and reverberations, beyond the United States, Europe, and Africa, to include Asia. Rediscovering the hitherto overlooked traces and reflections of Asia within the African American imagination, this dissertation argues that Asia has provided numerous African American authors and intellectuals, canonized as well as forgotten, with additional or alternative cultural resources that liberated them from, or at least helped them destabilize, what they considered as the constraining racial and nationalist discourse of the United States.

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## I. Introduction:

### Swinging, Jazzing, and Haiku-ing “Blackness”: The Multi-tonality of African American Haiku and Afro-Asian Literary Encounters in the Twentieth Century

Although accompanied by little fanfare, the year 2013 marks a significant moment in Afro-Asian literary encounters—the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of African American haiku. The generally forgotten beginning of African American literary engagement with that form is to be found in 1923 when Lewis G. Alexander’s fourteen *hokku*, or better known today as haiku, appeared in the December issue of *The Crisis*. Since then, numerous African American poets have tested the limits of haiku as a poetic form, expanding its possibilities by bending, twisting, and stretching it. While such poets as Richard Wright, Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, James A. Emanuel, and Lenard Moore have recently received long over-due critical attention, other African American haiku poets are still waiting to be “discovered” or “rediscovered.” It is the aim of this study, *Black Notes on Asia: Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013*, to examine the breadth and depth of the African American transcultural imagination, focusing on Afro-Asian exchanges that have taken place in general and on what I call the multi-tonality of African American haiku in particular.

Chapter 1 begins with a detailed inquiry into the various influences of Asia on

black writers and thinkers in the United States: Alexander's engagement with haiku in the 1920s, Frances E. W. Harper's transracial poem, "The Present Age," Anna Julia Cooper's critique of Western representations of Asia, Marita Bonner's figurative impersonation as Buddha in her well-known article, "On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored" (1925), Jean Toomer's ambivalent adaptation of Imagism and his evocations of the race memories of the Japanese, and finally Alain Locke's perception of the dominance of Asian art in the West as well as his reactions to the political situations in China (particularly concerning the May Fourth Movement of 1919). All of these examples speak to the complex, internationally informed racial dynamics of the United States that extend far beyond the simplicity of "black versus white." Each of these authors' engagement with Asia attests to the global, cosmopolitan outlooks of the "New Negroes," encouraging us to explore new ways of thinking and writing about the Harlem Renaissance.

Similarly, the over 4,000 haiku that Richard Wright produced during 1959 and 60, just before his premature death at the age of 52, compel us to reconsider, at a fundamental level, the still dominant image of Wright as the naturalist writer of *Native Son*. As Chapter 2 will show, Wright was "obsessed" with haiku and would spend his sick days spitting out one short poem after another in the three-line form while lying on his bed. He then spent several months on polishing these tiny gems. I will argue that haiku, or "projections in haiku manner" as he preferred to call them, provided Wright not only with personal catharsis but also with a clear vision of the decolonization of the

mind, a vision he termed the “de-Occidentalization” of the world.

As Chapter 3 will argue, Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones’s early interests in the Eastern thought, art, and literature have also been overshadowed first by his black nationalist writings in the late 60s and then by his third-world revolutionary rhetoric since the mid-70s. By focusing on both his editorial and poetic contributions to the little magazine *Yūgen: a new consciousness in arts and letter* (1958-62), this chapter examines the recurring ambivalent figures of Asia in his early writings, and provides the relevant contexts for Baraka’s more recent poetic experiments in “low coup,” the African American poet’s transcultural and transnational riff on haiku.

Apart from the writings of these major poets, which are addressed in detail in the forthcoming chapters, the popularity, richness, and variety of this tradition can also be seen in the works of many other African American poets and artists worthy of mentioning here, if only briefly. In 1973, for example, Tania León produced “Haiku,” a ballet music adaptation of a series of classical haiku. The ensemble consisted of flute, bassoon, guitar, Japanese *koto*, cello, double bass, and five percussions. As Frank J. Oteri aptly puts it in the liner notes on the song,<sup>1</sup> León created an “über-haiku,” a super- or meta-haiku consisting of a narration of seventeen poems by four classic Japanese masters—Basho, Buson, Hyakuchi, and Raizan—each of which was made of seventeen syllables. “Haiku,” as Oteri continues, contained “a vibrant synergistic totality that foreshadows the omnivorous polystylism of the early 21st century.” It is

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<sup>1</sup> The song’s recording was later made into a CD album, and is now widely available.

worth noting that León composed the piece specifically for a performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem, an all-African-American ballet company founded in 1969 as the first of its kind.

In a similar manner, if for quite different purposes, Dudley Randall has produced haiku-inspired poem series called the “Pacific Epitaphs.” Consisting of seventeen short poems of two to three lines each, Randall explored the meaning of the African American sacrifice and contribution during WWII. These powerful haiku-like poems poignantly inscribe and memorialize in the form of epitaphs the violent and traumatic experiences of African Americans in the Pacific theatre:

Rabaul

In far-off Rabaul

I died for democracy.

Better I fell

In Mississippi.

Iwo Jima

Like oil of Texas

My blood gushed here.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that 700 to 900 African American marines landed on Iwo Jima and played a

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<sup>2</sup> “Pacific Epitaphs” in *More to Remember* 36-39.

crucial role in supplying the ammunition to the frontlines when the Allied Forces took over crucial strategic locations on the Pacific island is still largely forgotten. For this very reason, Spike Lee boycotted Clint Eastwood's two recent feature films: *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). "In his version of Iwo Jima," fumed the African American director, "Negro soldiers did not exist."<sup>3</sup> Sgt. Thomas McPhatter, an African American soldier who took part in the landing on the island, also protested the historical amnesia: "Of all the movies that have been made of Iwo Jima, you never see a black face. . . . This [*Flags of Our Fathers*] is the last straw. I feel like I've been denied, I've been insulted, I've been mistreated."<sup>4</sup> Even though segregation of the U.S. armed forces at the time officially prevented African Americans from engaging in combats, the black veterans such as McPhatter remind us of their significant contribution to the Pacific War.

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<sup>3</sup> For the dispute between Eastwood and Lee, see Alex Altman, "Were African-Americans at Iwo Jima?" which provides a more balanced account of the reality on the battlefield. Ronald David Jackson, who has retrieved a number of photographs from the Department of Defense & Smithsonian Institute to corroborate the African Americans' essential role, also criticizes Eastwood's films and the HBO's 10-part series, *The Pacific*, produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, for deliberately excluding African Americans from an important chapter in the U.S. history. For more on the African Americans' participation in WWII, see Michael Cullen Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II*.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Dan Glaister, "Where Have All the Black Soldiers Gone?: African-Americans Written Out of Pacific War in Clint Eastwood's new film, Veterans Say."

Whether or not racist bias was indeed behind Eastwood's decision not to include African Americans in his films, what is certain is that American cultural imaginary has frequently marginalized or obliterated African Americans in the historical accounts of the wars the United States fought. In this sense, Randall's epitaphs are crucial, for they serve as powerful testaments to the sacrifices of those African Americans who lost their lives on Iwo Jima and elsewhere in the Pacific Theatre.

Moreover, the poet's choice to adapt a form associated with his former enemy bears special emphasis. "Pacific Epitaphs" articulate Randall's desire to work through, on the thematic level, the painful contradictions of racism suppressed in the putative war for democracy. More important for the current discussion is the fact that, on the formal level, these haiku-like poems also seek to engage with the trauma of the violent encounter between the blacks and the Japanese in the past. Put another way, by deliberately choosing the haiku form as a preferred means of mourning the African American dead, Randall literally and literarily restages the once hostile encounter between the two groups in transcultural terms. Instead of maximizing the difference between the United States and Japan, these African American poems inspired by haiku performatively create the commonality between African Americans and the Japanese.

Another forgotten adaptation of haiku by an African American poet is JoAnn Anderson's "Summer time haiku, not on nature, but on being natural," also published in 1973, at the height of the Black Arts Movement. It is perhaps no coincidence that this haiku-inspired poem was released from Broadside Press, Randall's independent



publishing house. As the self-explanatory title tells us, Anderson adapted the 5-7-5 syllabic structure of haiku (and the famous song in *Porgy and Bess*, written by DuBose Hayward, set to music by George Gershwin), not to sing of the “easy livin’” in summer time, but of the daily struggles of African Americans, as they get through hot, crummy days and nights:

It is summer time  
And her hot pants feel so cool  
Hugging hips that sway

Ice cream man tinkles  
Through a multitude of kids  
who wish for a dime

The cool dudes in their  
unpaid for convertibles  
white on white in white

Fat sweaty mamas  
lounging on porches, legs spread  
to cop a cool breeze

Sounds of soul pour through  
open screen doors and windows  
blue notes merge and blend . . .

Anderson catalogues a diverse range of African Americans, male and female, young and old, as she records the black life in summer through her vivid imagery. The poem recognizes the resilience of African Americans in the midst of poverty by noting how their cultural forms sustain their lives: the “sounds of soul” and “blue notes” fill the air.

Unlike Gershwin’s “Summertime,” which promises religious or political redemption in the near future—“One of these mornings/ You’re going to rise up singing/ Then you’ll spend your wings/ And you’ll take to the sky”—Anderson’s ghetto haiku nevertheless ultimately offers a much more sobering vision of the seemingly endless cycle of struggle. In this version of summertime, the stifling heat keeps everyone awake at night:

Unbearable heat  
denies sleep and sweat-drenched sheets  
make rising early.

The coolness of morn  
Brings with it promises of  
more hot summertime.

Another fascinating example of African American haiku is a series of recent haiku by

Joel Diaz-Porter. A two-time champion of the *National Haiku Slam* in 1998 and 1999, Diaz-Porter's work can be seen not only on printed pages, but also on his blog, YouTube and twitter. According to his webpage, his career in haiku-making goes back over a decade. Though not formally ambitious, his haiku demonstrates a thematic range that is truly wide, offering vivid images rooted in the African American cultural tradition: "Spirituals are how/ angels would sound, singing/ in a cotton field"<sup>5</sup>; "Jazz is the way/ Brown sugar would sound if it/ Was sprinkled in your ear."<sup>6</sup> Some of his haiku are more political: "King's blood/ on a motel balcony- April Sunset"<sup>7</sup>; "Filling the ducts/ of Trayvon's open eyes-/ Spring downpour."<sup>8</sup> Evidently, the haiku form has enabled this post-Civil-Rights, post-Black-Aesthetic contemporary African American poet to express, to borrow from Langston Hughes's famous declaration in 1926, "his dark-skinned self without fear or shame."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the use of haiku has also made it possible for this African American poet to explore themes that are not explicitly racial,

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<sup>5</sup> "Haiku." *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* 3.3 (Summer 2002). Web. 1 Feb. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> "Haiku." *The 100 Best African American Poem*. Ed. Nikki Giovanni. (2010): 170.

<sup>7</sup> Trayvon, of course, refers to Trayvon Martin, the seventeen-year-old African American boy who was shot and murdered in 2012 by George Zimmerman, the self-appointed watchman of a gated-community in Florida, where Trayvon was vacationing. The haiku, accompanied by the hash tag "#tmmmpoetry," was posted via the poet's iPhone at 22:33, March 17, 2013, during the NPR's annual poetry-month-related campaign.

<sup>8</sup> "NaPoMo 30 Haiku/Senryu." *DJ Renegade (On the Ones and Twos)*. 1 April 2012. Web. 1 February 2013.

<sup>9</sup> "The Negro and the Racial Mountain" 59.

such as a broken-heart (“Pretending not/ to notice her hand in his/ the waning moon”), erotic sensuality (“As my tongue/ wets your inner ear—a sudden shiver”), and evocative urban images (“Beside the dumpster/a rat drinking rain/ from an eggshell”), thereby, as he states on his homepage, freeing the black poet from the charge (legitimate or not) of parochial identity politics.

On his website, Porter also explains how one should read and write haiku. Just as Richard Wright in the late 1950s transculturally adapted the form, the contemporary African American poet claims that the goal is not to recreate the “authenticity” of haiku in the English language:

Your Sixth Grade English teacher told you that haiku are seventeen syllable Japanese poems about nature, written on three lines in a 5-7-5 syllabic format. And she (or he) was wrong. Well, the Japanese part is true of their origins at least. Actually, everything except the three line part and “the about nature” part, are mostly true of haiku in Japanese. But we aint [*sic.*] reading and writing in Japanese, so that doesn’t really help butter our biscuits. So forget 17 syllables, forget 5-7-5[,] forget three lines.<sup>10</sup>

Despite his rebellious-sounding stage name, DJ Renegade, which might be understood as his *hai-gō* [the penname that a haiku poet traditionally adopts when s/he writes in this form], however, Diaz-Porter is here simply restating the loosely established rule of

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<sup>10</sup> “Bonbons and Tiny Truffles.” *DJ Renegade (On the Ones and Twos)*. 22 May 2012. Web. <http://renegadesblog.blogspot.jp/2012/05/bonbons-and-tiny-truffles.html>

writing haiku in English. Most of contemporary haiku poets in English indeed do not strictly follow the syllabic pattern of 5-7-5, and the total syllables of their haiku are often either longer or shorter than 17, although most, including Diaz-Porter himself (despite the defiant statement above), seem to prefer the three-line structure.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, while making subtle transcultural adaptations, he is not, in any real sense, rebelling against the classic tradition in terms of form.

It bears repeated emphasis that Porter is not the only African American poet writing haiku today. Along with Sonia Sanchez, James A. Emanuel, Lenard D. Moore, as well as Jamie Walker, Derrick Weston Brown, Tara Betts, to name only a few, he is one of the group of contemporary African American poets who have continued to adopt and adapt the form.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, the younger of these contemporary poets no longer view the act of writing haiku as in itself making an explicitly political or cultural statement, just as African American novelists do not question the appropriateness of writing a

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<sup>11</sup> After a heated debate on this very topic at the second meeting of the Haiku Society of America in 1968, the members came to a conclusion that 5-7-5 should be used as a “guideline” in the English haiku, but there was no reason for it to be a “requirement” (*A Haiku Path* 26). In 1970, Harold G. Henderson, one of the foremost Western authorities of haiku, suggested that English language haiku poets should try a one-line haiku, which was “[a]fter all . . . the Japanese method.” (28). Judging from the continuing popularity of the three-line haiku, however, few seemed to have taken his advice.

<sup>12</sup> I have learned a great deal from *Terebess Asia Online (TAO)*, which enlists a number of African American poets who wrote (or continue to write) haiku or haiku-like poetry. Some of the poems can be accessed through hyperlinks, see <http://terebess.hu/english/usa/haiku.html>.

novel, a literary form generally understood as having been invented in England.<sup>13</sup>

Since Alexander published his *hokku* in 1923, African American poets have thus created and enriched an intertextual community of haiku, a distinct tradition that I'd like to call African American *haikai*. The term *haikai* originally refers to "a witty light-hearted variety of linked-verse that became popular" in Japan during the 16th century.<sup>14</sup> *Haikai* is both the name of the genre as well as of the individual works written in this form. According to Ueda Makoto, in the game of *haikai*, several poets would work together as a team. The first poet, usually the most respected among the group, created a *hokku*, an opening verse, consisting of a 5-7-5 syllabic structure, to which the second poet added a couplet made of 7 syllables each. The game could be played indefinitely but typically ended when the number of verses reached 36, 50, or 100.<sup>15</sup> The participating poets would often decide on a *kigo* [a seasonal reference], and use it a kind of anchor to create a sense of unity among the ever-expanding and diversifying verses. It is out of this game that haiku was born, when Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) in the seventeenth century sublimated the *hokku*, the opening verse, into an independent art form. Just as the classic Japanese haiku poets played the

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever's *The Literary Channel: The Inter-National Invention of the Novel* has recently done a wonderful job of complicating the history of the novel by introducing the radically transnational perspectives to revise the supposed origin of the novel in England.

<sup>14</sup> Ueda Makoto, *Modern Japanese Haiku* 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 3.

improvisational, collective game of *haikai*, I would like to see these African American poets, especially in the post-WWII era, as metaphorically or sometimes literally forming a distinct, multi-tonal, globally-informed, cosmopolitan tradition, which, to borrow from Michael Eric Dyson, is “rooted in but not constrained by blackness.”<sup>16</sup> To put it differently, haiku has served some black poets as a vehicle not only to talk about race, but also to represent themes and concerns *beside race and racism*. In his review of Randall’s *After the Killing* (1973), Frank Marshall Davis underscored this transcultural potential of the haiku form in the following terms: “The entire world would have been intellectual poorer had the Japanese written their haiku exclusively for Nipponese.” (*Black World* 85).

To further clarify the specific context for my argument, let me introduce here a couple of passages. The first is taken from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s influential article “Criticism in the Jungle” (1984): “The ‘heritage’ of each black text written in a Western language is . . . a double-heritage, two-toned, as it were. Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular” (4). In this article and elsewhere, Gates has powerfully set the direction of African American literary studies, brilliantly articulating the African American authors’ rhetorical strategies to forge their distinct poetics out of their “black and white” heritages.

Compare Gates’s conception of black writing to the number 9 of Etheridge Knight’s

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<sup>16</sup> “Tour(é)ing Blackness” in Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to be Black Now* xiii.

prison “Haiku” series, and one will begin to see what is left out of his formulation:

Making jazz swing in

Seventeen syllables AIN’T

No square poet’s job. (*The Essential Etheridge Knight* 9)

This haiku, in my view, is a provocative and preemptive counterargument to Gates’s account of black literature. First of all, Knight’s haiku thematically goes beyond the black-white dichotomy, even if it articulates the difficulty for the African American poet to adopt or adapt a foreign cultural tradition, especially the one that is generally considered neither “black” nor “white,” a heritage that is traditionally identified neither as European, African nor American. And yet, his haiku performatively demonstrates on the formal level that Knight is perfectly capable of achieving the very feat of African Americanizing haiku. In other words, what the haiku of Knight and subsequent African Americans who have engaged with the form confirm is the reality that African American literature has not been just “two-toned.” In spite of the undeniable tendency toward racialization in the United States that has historically identified people mainly in terms of “black and white,” I argue in the pages to come that the genealogy of African American literature is certainly more diverse and complex than the reductive if convenient labels, “black and white,” can possibly account for. To riff on the title of Ntozake Shange’s play, this dissertation provides a history of “colored” poets who have considered haiku/ when figures in “Black or White was not enuf.”

As an increasing number of studies on the Afro-Asian connections have shown, the



social and political interactions between the two groups have historically been complex, diverse, and multifaceted, featuring competition, conflict as well as peaceful coexistence and assimilation.<sup>17</sup> To begin with, one might recall white plantation owners' importation of Chinese laborers into Mississippi during the Reconstruction to replace African American sharecroppers,<sup>18</sup> or Frederick Douglass's critique of anti-Chinese immigration laws and his defense of a multiracial America in his 1896 speech, entitled "Our Composite Nationality."<sup>19</sup> One might also reconsider the significance of the figure of a "Chinaman" on a racially segregated train, mentioned by Justice Harlan's dissenting opinion in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision.<sup>20</sup>

In the twentieth century, some African Americans came to celebrate Japan as a

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<sup>17</sup> For an excellent overview of the recent scholarly interests in these relationships, see Hazel M. McFerson, "Asians and African Americans in Historical Perspective." *Blacks and Asians: Crossings, Conflict and Commonality*. 19-54; Crystal S. Anderson, "When Were We Colored?: Blacks and Asians and Racial Discourse." McFerson, *Blacks and Asians* 59-78; Daniel Widener, "Perhaps the Japanese Are to Be Thanked?: Asia, Asian Americans, and the Construction of Black California."

<sup>18</sup> James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*.

<sup>19</sup> Helen H. Jun, "Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship" and "The Press for Inclusion: The Nineteenth-Century Black Citizenship and the Anti-Chinese Movement." *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*. 15-32.

<sup>20</sup> Julia H. Lee, "Estrangement on a Train: Race and Narratives of American Identity in The Marrow of Tradition and America through the Spectacle of an Oriental Diplomat." *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African American and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937*. 48-80.

“champion of colored races” after its victory over Russia in 1905, while others critiqued the nation across the Pacific as a colored fascist empire.<sup>21</sup> In a poignantly symbolic case which illustrates the tension between two minorities in the United States, Tadao Ozawa attempted to gain American citizenship by legally distinguishing and distancing the Japanese from blacks, even though the Supreme Court rejected his claim in 1922. Many African American newspapers vehemently denounced Ozawa for betraying the colored races in favor of the honorary white status. In contrast, the peaceful co-existence of African Americans and the Japanese Americans in California after the latter returned from the interment camps during WWII serves as an inspiring story of cross-racial solidarity between two minority groups.<sup>22</sup> There are also countless encounters between African Americans and Japanese Americans in Seattle and in

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on African American views of Japan and the Japanese, see Ernest Allen Jr., “When Japan Was ‘Champion of the Darker Races’: Satokata Takahashi and the Flowering of Black Messianic Nationalism”; Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?*; George Lipsitz, “‘Frantic to Join. . . the Japanese Army’: The Asia Pacific War in the Lives of African American Soldiers and Civilians”; Gerald Horne, “The Revenge of the Black Pacific?”; Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945*; Etsuko Taketani, “The Cartography of the Black Pacific: James Weldon Johnson’s *Along This Way*”; Yuichiro Onishi, “The New Negro of the Pacific: How African Americans Forged Cross-Racial Solidarity with Japan, 1917-1922” and *Transpacific Anti-Racism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th-Century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa*.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*.

Chicago, which are now beginning to be historicized with due attention to their full complexity.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the stories of Yuri Kochiyama's activism in Harlem and her friendship with Malcolm X (which Spike Lee's bio-pic arbitrarily erased), as well as Grace-Lee Boggs and James Boggs' interracial activism in Detroit, have being excavated as important chapters of the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s and 60s. One could go on and on to list numerous other instances of what some scholars have come to call "Afro-Asian encounters."<sup>24</sup>

Rather than further restoring the neglected social or political interchanges between peoples of Asian and African descent in the United States, as historians and political scientists have recently done, the main goal of this study, *Black Notes on Asia: Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013*, is to study the texts produced by the peoples of African and Asian descent and to retrace some of the forgotten routes through which literary forms and techniques traveled from one place to another, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America.

By focusing on the dissemination and transformation of haiku, among other literary traditions associated with Asia, I elucidate how the various engagements of African American poets with the form create a unique and compelling case from which

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<sup>23</sup> Quintard Taylor, "Blacks and Asians in a White City, 1870-1942." McFerson, *Blacks and Asians* 79-112; Jacalyn D. Harden, *Double Cross: Japanese Americans in Black and White Chicago*.

<sup>24</sup> See Raphael-Hernandez and Steen, eds. *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*.

to argue for the re-historicization and de-marginalization of African American transcultural and cosmopolitan literary imagination. It is my contention that, throughout modern history, African American writers and poets have concerned themselves not only with race and racism (i.e. “blackness” or “whiteness”) but also with various other literary themes that had little to do with race, that is, with subjects that were *beside* race, if not *beyond* it.

## Chapter 1

*“If you had not sung/ Then what would I imitate,/ Happy nightingale?”<sup>25</sup>:*

### Imitations of Asia in the Formulations of the New Negro Poetics

*Imitation is a good thing. All civilization depends upon it. But there may be a limit to the number of people who ought to imitate precisely the same body of ideas and customs. For imitation is not man's whole business. There ought to be some room for variety.*

Josiah Royce, “Provincialism” (1905)

*The Skin-of-Civilization must be very thin. A thought can drop you through it.*

Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower* (1928)

## Introduction: The Birth of African American Haiku

On the cover of December 1923 edition of *The Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People, was an image of a dark complexioned child holding a musical score and practicing Christmas carols with two

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis G. Alexander, “Japanese Hokkus” (*The Crisis*, Dec. 1923): 68.

white men. One of those men was shown placing his arm around the child's shoulder, affectionately, perhaps even a bit patronizingly from today's standards, giving her (or him) instructions. Undoubtedly there were many readers at the time who welcomed such an image as fitting nicely with the magazine's sworn goals of realizing racial equality and the social and cultural advancement of African Americans. Such readers must have been amazed at one of the articles featured in this issue of *The Crisis*. Though it is generally forgotten and critically ignored today, this is where and when Lewis G. Alexander published his epoch-making two-page article entitled "Japanese Hokkus."

Anticipating the lack of knowledge about this foreign literary tradition on the part of his readers, Alexander first provides a short history of Japanese poetry and then introduces fourteen of his own experiments inspired by *hokku*, better known today as haiku. Pioneering a tradition that was to flourish decades later, some of Alexander's *hokku* poems more or less faithfully emulate the classic Japanese aesthetic. The poems in this group loosely follow the conventional 5-7-5 syllabic structure and dutifully included a *kigo* [a seasonal reference, which is a crucial component of classic haiku] to present vivid snapshots of nature: "A wood violet/ Alone in the spacious hut/ Worshipping the sun" (67), for instance, could almost have been written by a Japanese poet, say of the seventeenth century. It is worth mentioning, however, that even such a seemingly faithful rendition turns out to be identifiably "non-Japanese." The poem's season word, wood violet, is native to North America, confirming that Alexander subtly

transposed the foreign tradition to fit his own environment.

Apart from such faithful imitations, the majority of Alexander's self-identified "Japanese *hokku*" series often clearly deviate from the thematic and formal conventions of classic Japanese poetics. First of all, in many of his poems the speaker is much more effusive than the generally self-effacing poetic "I" of classic haiku; to be more specific, the narrative voice of his *hokku* is evidently more subjective than that of Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), whom Alexander praises in his article. Alexander's poetic "I" typically projects his feelings onto nature in a lyrical tone much closer to those of romantic poets such as Shelley or Keats: "My soul like a tree/ Sways above dry-leaf Autumn: Be kind, oh wind-god." Or "Like cherry blossoms/ Dancing with the passing wind—/ My shattered hopes." Vivid and concise as these images may be—and what could be more "Japanese" than cherry blossoms?—they also ignore an important convention of classic haiku poetics: the use of simile and metaphor, which is shunned by classic Japanese poets. Just to underscore the point further, the concluding poem is more of a didactic epigram than a typical haiku, clearly lacking in suggestiveness, not to mention the absence of seasonal reference: "Life is history/ Turn not away from the book/ Write on every page" (68).

According to the general standard of the classic Japanese aesthetic, many of Alexander's "Japanese Hokkus" therefore lack vital elements of the genre, and may not even qualify as haiku. Nevertheless, Alexander's poems are of significance because of the African American poet's enthusiasm for the self-consciously "non-black" and

“non-Western” tradition. In her excellent overview of African American poetry in the twentieth century, Karen Jackson Ford has recently credited Alexander’s *hokku* with anticipating similar efforts of numerous African American poets since the 1960s to the present (Richard Wright, Dudley Randall, James A. Emanuel, Sonia Sanchez, and Etheridge Knight).<sup>26</sup> Noting the significance of Alexander’s role as an initiator of African American haiku, however, Ford leaves a series of fascinating questions unasked: Why was the poet attracted to this form in the first place? What was the motive behind identifying his style as specifically “Japanese”? What did it mean for the African American poet to consciously align himself with a Japanese/Asian tradition during the New Negro Renaissance? Were not all the black poets, as we are generally taught, preoccupied with creatively adapting—or “slavishly” imitating, as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka would accuse the middle-class black poets of doing<sup>27</sup>—the “white” forms such as sonnet, if not proudly rediscovering the rich

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<sup>26</sup> Ford mentions Alexander’s 1927 “Japanese Hokku,” but seems to be unaware of the earlier 1923 article I am examining here, see “Fight and the Fiddle in Twentieth-Century African American Poetry” 394. To my knowledge, no scholar has looked at this series closely. Hakutani Yoshinobu never mentions Alexander in any of his important studies on African American haiku, including *Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism: From Spatial Narrative to Jazz Haiku* (2006).

Higginson’s “Afro-American Haiku” (later revised as “African American Haiku”) and Trumbull’s “The American Haiku Movement. Part I: Haiku in English,” provide a useful but admittedly incomplete list of African American haiku poets of note such as Robert Hayden, Julius Lester, and Randolph Nelson Levy.

<sup>27</sup> See Hughes, “The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain”; Wright, “Blueprint for



reservoir of the African American vernacular? Where does Alexander's "Japanese *hokkus*" fit in the cultural and racial landscape of the 1920s?<sup>28</sup> Where and how much did Alexander learn about *haiku* and what exactly did he find useful or interesting in the tradition? In addition, was he the only New Negro writer, a lone wolf, to be attracted to the Japanese or other Asian cultural traditions during the Harlem Renaissance?

While answering these questions, this chapter will challenge the essentialized, static notion of discretely imagined racial and national traditions, which usually come under such labels as "white," "black," "Asian [be it "Chinese," "Japanese," or "Indian"]. In the following pages, I will reexamine the boundary-bending, multiracially mediated and mediating literary works and cultural criticism of Lewis G. Alexander, Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Marita Bonner, Jean Toomer, and Alain Locke. By

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Negro Writing"; Baraka, "The Myth of 'Negro Literature.'"

<sup>28</sup> Early influential works on the Renaissance, such as Nathan Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) and *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), as well as Houston Baker, Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) completely ignore Alexander. David Levering Lewis's *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1979) mentions "Streets," one of Alexander poems that appeared in *FIRE!!* (1926), but offers no analysis of it. An important exception is Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History* (1976), which includes a short biography of the poet and a comparison of Alexander's work to that of Langston Hughes. However, Redmond seems to have been unaware of haiku's influence on the poet when he concluded, "Alexander's poetry is concise and neat, mostly in free verse and conventional language" (213). Even George Hutchison's otherwise brilliant and comprehensive *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) overlooks the transcultural significance of his *hokku*.

shedding light on their critically forgotten interests in Asia, I argue that Asia inflected their cultural and racial politics and, however briefly and elusively, provided these African Americans with alternative cultural resources that were more or less free from the constraining racial discourse of the United States. To varying degrees and in different ways, cultural traditions that disseminated from Asia (and traveled meandering paths to reach them) enabled these African American writers and thinkers to avoid, complicate, or approach issues of race in the United States from new and different angles.

Furthermore, I will also analyze references to Asia (and Asian America) that other black as well as white American writers and intellectuals of the period made in relation to Africa and black America. This is to underscore the fact that the “newness” of the “New Negroes” lay in their increasingly broadening *and* deepening cultural knowledge and interests, which went far beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>29</sup> The principal

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<sup>29</sup> For recent scholarly works on the transnational dimensions of African American literature before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance/ the New Negro Renaissance, see among others: Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-57* (2003); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (2005); Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem 1919-1939* (2009); Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (2004); M. Kutzinski, *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas* (2012); Luo Lianggong, “China

goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that the ruling conception of the so-called “Harlem Renaissance in black and white,” to evoke George Hutchinson’s influential work on the period’s *intercultural* expression, still fails to pay due attention to its even more radically multiracial/multicultural/transnational aesthetics and perspectives. In order to understand the complexity and heterogeneity of African American imagination during the 1920s and 30s, I argue, it is necessary to account for cultural ebbs and flows, echoes and reverberations, not just among Africa, Europe, and the United States, or to put it in the uniquely articulated American idiom, not just “between black and white.” Rediscovering the hitherto overlooked traces and reflections of Asia within the “black” imagination in the United States, this chapter ultimately calls for a significant revision of the history, not just of African American literature or of American literature, but also of world literature at large.<sup>30</sup>

As Kenneth W. Warren has recently argued, the “New Negro” literature arose primarily as a response to anti-black racism in the United States.<sup>31</sup> As early as 1895, however, Victoria Earle Matthews boldly argued in her speech entitled “The Value of Race Literature” that African American literature’s “fullest and largest development ought not to be circumscribed by the narrow limits of race or creed, for the simple

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and the Political Imagination in Langston Hughes’s Poetry” (2012).

<sup>30</sup> For the recent resurgence in scholarly interests in the concept of “world literature,” see David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (2003); Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004).

<sup>31</sup> *What Was African American Literature?* (2011).

reason that literature in its loftiest development reaches out to the utmost limits of soul enlargement and outstrips all earthly limitations” (257).<sup>32</sup> Prefiguring the Harlem Renaissance’s and even post-Civil-Rights generation’s notion of “blackness,” Matthews emphasized:

When the literature of our race is developed, it will of necessity be different in all essential points of greatness . . . from what we may at the present time, for convenience, call American literature. . . . [R]elying upon finely developed, native imaginative powers, and humane tendencies, I base my expectation that our “Race Literature” when developed would not only compare favorably with many, but will stand out pre-eminently, not only in the limited history of colored people but in the broader field of universal literature. (256)

Lest her audience interpret her call as a cry for ethno-nationalism, she carefully qualified her definition: “‘Race Literature’ does not mean things uttered in praise, thoughtless praise of ourselves, wherein each goose thinks her gosling a swan” (268). I argue that the writings of Alexander and other African American writers that I will examine in the pages to follow embody Matthews’s ideal. Based on the history and culture of African Americans, their “race literature” was to form a vital part of world literature, which not only critiqued racism but also included themes and concerns that

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<sup>32</sup> For the contexts of this speech, see McHenry, “Reading, Writing and Reform in the Woman’s Era.” *Forgotten Readers* 187-250.

were *beside* race, if not *beyond* it.<sup>33</sup>

## II. Beside Blackness: Lewis G. Alexander's Transcultural Poetics of *Hokku*

It is important to note at the outset that Alexander also wrote non-*hokku* poems in traditional Western meters. Some of them were nevertheless heavily influenced by Imagism, if not directly by haiku. These poems appeared in important books and magazines of the New Negro Renaissance. For instance, "Africa" was published in the National Urban League's *Opportunity* (May 1924), a vital magazine that gave voice to many of the New Negro writers. The poem expressed a heart-felt hope for the reawakening of the colonized Africa, which was then often figured as the "sleeping . . . Motherland."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Alain Locke, the "dean" of the Renaissance, included

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<sup>33</sup> My work has been heavily influenced by Gene Andrew Jarrett's *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (2006) as well as *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007). However, I prefer the preposition "beside" to "beyond" when describing a group of texts whose central or explicit concern is not with race or racism. Jarrett has carefully referred to African American texts with no black characters in them as "unconventional or anomalous" (*African American Literature Beyond Race* 2), using these adjectives in a positive sense, but I argue that African Americans' interests in non-racial subjects or themes were just as frequently represented in literature (and therefore not so "anomalous"). For instance, George Hutchinson has perceptively pointed out, "Little of the poetry published in *The Crisis* used dialect or vernacular forms; in fact, most of it did not address racial issues at all" (150).

<sup>34</sup> Recently, scholars are beginning to pay renewed attention to Alexander's

Alexander's "Enchantment" in the epoch-making volume, *The New Negro* (1925). The poem's extensive use of exoticism and primitivism is reminiscent of Countee Cullen's "Heritage," which also appeared in the same year. Both poems articulated, at once, African Americans' distance from and their ambivalent longings for Africa.<sup>35</sup> In *FIRE!!*, a short-lived avant-garde magazine published in 1926 by a younger and more bohemian group of the Renaissance writers, such as Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, Alexander contributed two of his Imagistic poems: "Little Cinderella" and "Streets." The former was the defiant dramatic monologue of a city prostitute in the vernacular voice;<sup>36</sup> the latter evocatively painted a stark contrast within an urban setting (of Black America?): "Avenues of dreams/ Boulevards of pain/ Moving black streams/ Shimmering like rain."<sup>37</sup>

Despite his dexterity with both traditional as well as modernistic Western forms and "non-Japanese" modernist works. For a historically informed reading of this particular poem and the persistence of the figure of Africa as a sleeping motherland in African American literature of the period, see Corbould 37-38.

<sup>35</sup> See Hutchinson 419-20; Redmond 212-13.

<sup>36</sup> Along with Hughes's vernacular poem, also collected in *FIRE!!*, Paul Peppis has recently noted a similarity between these and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," suggesting a probable contemporaneous African American adaptation of high modernism: "Most interesting, both Alexander's 'Little Cinderella' and Hughes's 'Elevator Boy' rescript the modernist dramatic monologue to voice the alienation not of the educated white men like J. Alfred Prufrock, but of working-class African Americans." See 45-47.

<sup>37</sup> Peppis also suggests the influence of Imagism as well as T. S. Eliot's quatrain poems on this particular poem (ibid.).

techniques, Alexander kept writing “Japanese Hokku”<sup>38</sup> throughout the 20s. In other words, his “love” for what he fondly described as “these delicate petals that carry a rose in their fragrance” (“Japanese Hokkus” 67) was not a one-time affair. In the September 1925 edition of *Opportunity*, twenty more of his *hokku* were published, only one of which had appeared earlier in *The Crisis*. Moreover, when Countee Cullen edited *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (1927), another significant volume of the era, he included ten of Alexander’s *hokku*, two of which were reprinted from the earlier *Crisis* article, as well as eight *tanka* [another Japanese poetic form consisting of the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic structure]. Cullen attached a short biography of Alexander, which remains to this day as the primary source of information about the poet’s life.<sup>39</sup> The biography notes that Alexander “has been writing poetry since 1917, specializing in Japanese forms” (122).

As we have already learned, this biography misrepresents Alexander’s poetic career,

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<sup>38</sup> After the *Crisis* article, Alexander apparently decided to drop the plural “s” in referring to his “*hokku*.”

<sup>39</sup> From the biography, we learn that Alexander was born in Washington D.C. in 1900. He attended Howard University and the University of Pennsylvania. As a student, he began an acting career as a member of the Howard Players and later joined the Ethiopian Art Theatre (financially supported by Alice Sherwood Anderson, the writer Sherwood Anderson’s wife) and appeared in *Salome* and *The Comedy of Errors* when the company staged them on Broadway in 1922 and 23. In 1927, he served as the guest editor of the *Carolina Magazine* when it featured African American literature. He also directed small theatre companies such as the Ira Aldridge Players of the Grover Cleveland School and the Randall Community Center Players (*Caroling Dusk* 122).

for he did not “specialize” exclusively in the Japanese forms. Cullen’s anthology in fact showcased some of his non-*hokku* poems featuring explicitly racial themes and juxtaposed them with his *hokku* and *tanka*, which addressed racially neutral subjects. In addition to Alexander’s previously mentioned “Africa,” “Negro Woman,” whose Imagistic style (“The sky hangs heavy tonight/ Like the hair of a Negro woman./ The scars of the moon are curved/ Like the wrinkles on the brow of a Negro woman./ The stars twinkle tonight/ Like the glaze in a Negro woman’s eyes,/ Drinking the tears set flowing by an aging hurt/ Gnawing at her heart. . . .”) evokes Jean Toomer’s superimposition of female facial features on the terrible Southern landscape in *Cane*, particularly in “Karintha” and “Face.” This group of poems also included: “The Dark Brother,” which alludes to Song of Solomon (1:5) and celebrates blackness and African Americans’ contribution to the nation—“Lo, I am black but comely too,/ Black as the night, black as the deep night caves./ I am the scion of a race of slaves/ Who helped a nation strong that you/ And I may stand within the world’s full view . . .”; “Day and Night,” a powerful incantatory poem which begins with the refrain, “The day is a Negro/ Yelling out of breath./ The night is a Negro/ Laughing up to death . . .” and ends, “I am like a rainbow,/ Arched across the way./ Yes, I am a rainbow/ Being night or day.” “Transformation” is the only exception in the group which lacks explicit reference to race, though Locke, in his review, read it primarily if not exclusively in racial terms.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Locke’s reading emphasized the racialized particular, but he characteristically saw the universal expressed through it: “Lewis Alexander’s ‘Transformation’ expresses a



In the poem, the speaker washes “bitterness” with “tears” and returns it as “a loveliness” [to whom is deliberately unspecified].

The juxtaposition of Alexander’s two sets of poems on the pages of *Caroling Dusk* entails seemingly contradictory effects for the readers. Noticing the complete lack of reference to blackness and racism, some readers might realize all the more clearly that his *hokku* and *tanka* explore themes “beside,” if not “beyond,” blackness. In contrast, other readers might interpret that the boundary between the two categories (racial and non-racial poems) is deliberately blurred, which actually seems to be the point of Cullen’s editing. For instance, one can detect a weary tone similar to what one hears in the spirituals or the blues in “Tanka VI”: “By the pool of life/ Willows are drooping tonight./ I can see no stars./ What dances in the water?/ O my clouds dripping with tears” (126). Or, in these haiku: “Death is not cruel/ From what I have seen of life; Nothing remains”; “Sitting by the pool,/ I looked in and saw my face./ O that I were blind!” (128). One might argue that some, if not all, of Alexander’s *hokku* and *tanka* subtly African Americanize—or to use a more familiar and conveniently vague expression, “blacken”—the Japanese traditions.

Cullen’s Forward to *Caroling Dusk* helps locate Alexander’s *hokku* and *tanka* in a contemporary debate about what, how, and for whom African American authors should

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characteristic racial largesse and the social forgiveness of the Negro . . . . All the more effective, this—because it might just as well be a romantic lyric of unrequited love or a poem of Christian forgiveness, though obviously it is the old miracle of the deepest particularity finding the universal” (“The Message of the Negro Poets.” *Carolina* 75).

(and should not) write. As is well known, Cullen's attitude towards race was that of gradual transcendence through assimilation. With degrees from New York University and Harvard, it is no surprise that Cullen chose this option over black nationalism. In poetry, he disapproved of the use of dialect and produced impeccably metered sonnets (his favorite was the English romantic poet, John Keats, to whom he dedicated a lyrical poem).<sup>41</sup> He often used the conventional form to sing of non-racial themes such as love, though he also explored the ambivalent life of blacks in the racist United States. Even when he critiqued racism, Cullen ultimately affirmed the fundamental "Americanness" of African Americans. The previously mentioned "Heritage" (1925), for instance, distanced and exoticized Africa and asked point-blank, "What is Africa to me?"<sup>42</sup> "Yet Do I Marvel" (1925) gave voice to the plight of being a black American poet (though the very eloquence of the poem performatively demonstrates the perfect compatibility between being black and a poet): "I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind. . . . Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/ To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (Gates and McKay 1341).

Cullen's explanation for putting together *Caroling Dusk*, for selecting poems such as Alexander's haiku and *tanka*, is then perfectly consistent with his social and aesthetic philosophy:

I have called this collection an anthology of verse by Negro poets rather than

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<sup>41</sup> "To John Keats, Poet, at Springtime." *Caroling Dusk* 184.

<sup>42</sup> Hutchinson 410-12.

an anthology of Negro verse, since this latter designation would be more confusing than accurate. . . . [T]he attempt to corral the outbursts of the ebony muse into some definite mold to which all poetry by Negroes will conform seems altogether futile and aside from the facts. (xi)

Cullen goes too far, in my view, when he declares that it is “futile” to identify “Negro poetry” as a coherent, meaningful tradition. Needless to say, scholars of African American literature have compellingly shown that there are certain shared and recurring tropes and meaningful rhetorical strategies within African American writing (even if certain “African American” elements may not be shared by “all” the texts produced by African American authors).<sup>43</sup> In any case, Cullen was certainly not unique in recognizing the fundamental “Americanness” of African Americans while demanding that the heterogeneity of their writings be recognized at the same time.

For instance, responding to Du Bois’s questionnaire, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed,” Walter White, the soon-to-be head of the NAACP, stated in 1926:

The Negro writer, just like any other writer, should be allowed to write of whatever interests him whether it be of lower, or middle, or upper-class Negro life in America; or of white—or Malay—or Chinese—or Hottentot characters and should be judged not by the color of the writer’s skin but solely by the story he produces. (194)

For the African American poet/critic, William Stanley Braithwaite (1878-1962), from

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<sup>43</sup> See among others, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Signifying Monkey* and *Figures in Black*.

whom Cullen frequently took advice while living in Cambridge, MA, race mattered even less, not just in theory but also in practice. Though he faced his share of racial discrimination, Braithwaite commanded a formidable influence as the literary editor of *The Boston Evening Transcript*. With his tremendous passion for poetry, Braithwaite published an annual *Anthologies of Magazine Verse* (1913-29), and helped launch the early careers of so many prominent black as well as white poets—such as Claude McKay, Amy Lowell, James Weldon Johnson, and Robert Frost. His heated public debates with Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, over the future direction of modern American poetry had a crucial role in reviving the popularity of poetry among the reading public and bringing about a veritable poetic renaissance in United States during the 1910s.<sup>44</sup> Like Cullen, Braithwaite wrote formally conventional poetry

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<sup>44</sup> For the various interpretations of Braithwaite's life and works, see Lorenzo Thomas's excellent summary in "William Stanley Braithwaite and Harriet Monroe: The Battle for New Poetry" in *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* 45-76 [the same essay is reprinted with a different title, "W. S. Braithwaite vs. Harriet Monroe: The Heavyweight Poetry Championship, 1917," in Nielsen, *Reading Race in American Poetry* 84-106]; Eugene Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History* 131-34; Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* 38-39, 66-67, 109-10; for a more recent and detailed account of the social and cultural environment in which Braithwaite emerged, see James Smethurst, *African American Origin of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* 146-54. For a nuanced but ultimately negative assessment, see Hutchinson's "From Dusk to Dawn: The Trials of Williams Stanley Braithwaite," in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* 350-60.

himself, but as an editor, he was open to different traditions and new experiments, for he believed “All great artists are interracial and international in rendering in the medium of any particular art the fundamental passions and the primary institutions of humanity” (*Reader* 54; “Some Contemporary Poets of the Negro Race,” *The Crisis* 1919). Perhaps for this reason, Alfred Kreyborg, the influential editor of *Other*, praised him as an “anthologist to all races” (573).

George Schuyler also insisted on the fundamental “Americanness” of African Americans and offered perhaps the sharpest critique of the myth of race in 1926, when he published “The Negro Art Hokum” in *The Nation*. The article satirically denied racial difference altogether, emphasizing commonalities between blacks and whites as fellow citizens of the United States: “Aframerican is merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon. . . . Aside from his color, which ranges from the very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American. Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same” (52).

While Schuyler emphasized the shared national identity (however inflected by *regional* differences it may be) to discredit *racial* difference, Langston Hughes, who was invited by the magazine’s editor to respond, affirmed rather than rejected the particularity of African Americans in “The Negro and the Racial Mountain.” Significantly, Hughes criticized both anti-black racism among whites and black middle-class’s internalization of it, which manifested itself in their insistence on respectability and conformity. For this reason, he defiantly celebrated blackness in its

all diversity and placed a supreme value on the individual freedom of the African American artist:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (59)

Reading Hughes along with Schuyler, one learns that, whether racial difference is denied or affirmed, and by implication, whatever form or style is chosen by an African American artist, the underlying issue was perhaps ultimately that of self-confidence (or self-hate).

It is generally assumed that Hughes in "The Negro and the Racial Mountain" had someone like Cullen or Braithwaite on mind when he criticized "the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia" (58).<sup>45</sup> It is true that Cullen chose to locate himself squarely within the English poetic traditions rather than being seduced by "any nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African inheritance." One should not forget, however, that he did not adopt a color-blind policy, as the term is commonly used today. From his perspective, an

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<sup>45</sup> As Hutchinson perceptively pointed out, it should be noted that Hughes and the other formally more daring editors of *FIRE!!* did include Cullen's poems, despite their aversion to his formal conservatism.

anthology like *Caroling Dusk* was necessary because the contemporary racist attitudes of the society continued to deny or ignore the talent of African American authors and their writings' rich diversity. In his ideal future, he hoped that there would ultimately be no need for a race-based book—whether it may be called an “anthology of verse by Negro poets” or “anthology of Negro verse.”

Cullen's double-commitment to the “English” traditions and to the diversity of African Americans' writings gave rise to a perplexing dilemma. This is clearly discernible in the editing choice he made in compiling *Caroling Dusk*:

While I do not feel that the work of these writers conforms to anything that can be called the Negro school of poetry, neither do I feel that their work is varied to the point of being sensational; rather is theirs a variety within a uniformity that is trying to maintain the higher traditions of English verse. I trust the selections here presented bear out this contention. (xii)

Cullen here revised W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation of African American “double consciousness,” and declared that “the double obligation of being both Negro and American is not so unified as we are often led to believe.” Like Hughes, Cullen went on to argue that every individual black poet should produce a unique individual poetics of his/her own, just as poets of other races would:

A survey of the work of Negro poets will show that the individual diversifying ego transcends the synthesizing hue. From the roots of varied experiences have flowered the dialect of Dunbar, the recent sermon poems of

James Weldon Johnson, and some of Helene Johnson's more colloquial verses . . . . Attempt to hedge all these in with a name, and your imagination must deny the facts. Langston Hughes, poetizing the blues in his zeal to represent the Negro masses, and Sterling Brown . . . with a capacity for turning a neat sonnet according to the rules, represent differences as unique as those between Burns and Whitman. (xii)

Cullen seems to be unaware of the irony that his conservatism and desire for assimilation contradicted his own claim. Put differently, the fundamental contradiction in his criteria for African American literature made him blind to the true heterogeneity of writings by African American authors that he promoted through his anthology. It is telling that even though he endorsed Hughes's blues poems in this particular text, he had publicly critiqued them just a few years before.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Cullen would soon again complain in 1929, "Must we, willy-nilly, be forced into writing of nothing but the old atavistic urges, the more savage and none too beautiful aspects of our lives? May we not chant a hymn to the Sun God if we will, create a bit of phantasy in which not a spiritual or a blues appears . . . ?" (qtd. in Hutchinson 411). In other words, while promoting the diversity of writings by African Americans, Cullen sought to redirect, if not to domesticate or suppress, the experimental works of other African American writers when they deviated from his "English" ideals. In other words, he failed—or refused—to see that many younger black (and white) poets in the United States were doing their best

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<sup>46</sup> Hutchinson 188.



to free themselves from the very model to which he clung.

The following passage confirms Cullen's strained and increasingly obsolete position, which derived from his desire to celebrate the "outbursts of the ebony muse" while stubbornly adhering to the "English" model:

Jessie Fauset with Cornell University and training at the Sorbonne as her intellectual equipment surely justifies the very subjects and forms of her poems: "Touché," "La Vie C'est la Vie," "Noblesse Oblige," etc.; while Lewis Alexander, with no known degree from the University of Tokyo, is equally within the province of his creative prerogatives in composing Japanese *hokkus* and *tankas*.

For Cullen, Fauset's sentimental love poems, with their French titles, were still recognizably "English," just as Alexander's "Japanese *hokku* and *tanka*" were valuable because they showed, in his estimate at least, the diversity of African American writing while "maintain[ing] the higher traditions of English verse."

Despite Cullen's claim, there is more evidence to suggest that Alexander might have had other motives for writing poems he specifically identified as "Japanese." In 1928, Nellie R. Blight reviewed the poet's latest works in *Caroling Dusk*. Notably, her reading of these *hokku* was the diametrical opposite of Cullen's: "There are not enough English forms to satisfy Lewis Alexander, for having tried them he turns to two very interesting Japanese forms, the *hokku* and the *tanka*" (qtd. in Martin). Blight's suggestive comment leads us to identify Alexander's attempt at *hokku* as a search for

alternatives to the “higher traditions of English verse” rather than as an expression of his desire to “maintain” them.

Let us look at another kind of response to Alexander’s *hokku* and *tanka*. In the section entitled “The Discovery of Still Another Dawn” in his 1929 survey of American poetry, *Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry* (1620-1930), Alfred Kreymborg (the poet/anthologist of *Des Imagistes*, which had famously launched Imagism in 1914) noted the recent “renascence or poetic birth of the dark race” (571). He unequivocally endorsed the works of James Weldon Johnson, Fenton Johnson, Helen Johnson, Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Cullen, Waring Cuney, and Helene Johnson. In contrast, he had more mixed feelings about Alexander: “another talented writer . . . relies too much on the Orientals: his ‘Tanka’ and ‘Hokku’ do not escape their Japanese models” (575). It is fascinating that Kreymborg interpreted Alexander’s poems as too “Oriental” to qualify as “American,” let alone “English,” while for Cullen, the same poems had enough characteristics of English verse to be celebrated. In a sense, Cullen was more accurate than Kreymborg, for many of Alexander’s poems were, as I have demonstrated, loose adaptations of the Japanese forms. In any case, Kreymborg’s remark, read along with Blight’s, significantly undermines Cullen’s argument that Alexander wrote these poems in order to “maintain the higher traditions of English verse.”

Now that we have compared and contrasted conflicting interpretations of Alexander’s “Japanese hokku,” let us examine what he himself had to say about his

interests in the form. His *Crisis* article actually relied heavily on the account of haiku provided by John Gould Fletcher, the Harvard-educated imagist, who was a close associate of Amy Lowell. Alexander liberally lifted passages from Fletcher's preface to *Japanese Prints* (1918), an illustrated collection of his imagist poems thematically and formally inspired by Japanese art and literature. Foregrounding the interrelated issues of mediation, translation, and adaptation, Alexander's account of haiku sheds an instructive light on the meandering routes of cultural dissemination that led to his interests in the foreign tradition.

Two things stand out in Fletcher/Alexander's account. First, after giving an overview of the rise of haiku, Fletcher/Alexander admiringly dwells on the techniques used in Matsuo Bashō's frog poem ("An old pond/ And the sound of a frog leaping/ Into the water."), which they suspect might "mean nothing to the western mind" (67) unless carefully unpacked. Describing the Japanese poet as a significant innovator of the short poetic form, "the greatest epigrammatist of any time" (67), they explain that Bashō "even went so far as to disregard upon occasions the syllabic rule and to add extraneous syllables, if thereby he might perfect his statement." This seemingly casual observation on haiku's formal adaptability is crucial. Despite the fact that many cultural purists (in and out of Japan) since have sought faithfully to obey the conventions established by classic Japanese haiku poets, both Fletcher and Alexander must have felt emboldened to learn that the greatest master of the form himself sometimes felt it necessary to bend the rules.

It is important to bear in mind that Fletcher/Alexander's conflicting impulses to imitate and innovate the generic conventions of haiku echoed the contemporary aesthetic philosophy of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), the Italian philosopher/historian, who in *L'Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (1902) [Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic; translated into English by Douglas Ainslie in 1909], had argued:

While making a verbal pretense of agreeing or yielding a feigned obedience, artists have really always disregarded these *laws of the kinds* [of epic, tragedy, historical painting or landscape]. Every true work of art has violated some established kind and upset the ideas of the critics, who have thus been obliged to broaden the kinds, until finally even the broadened kind has proved too narrow, owing to the appearance of new works of art, naturally followed by new scandals, new upsettings and—new broadenings” (61).

As Lorenzo Thomas has noted, Croce's aesthetic philosophy was popularized in the United States by no other than Joel E. Spingarn, a professor of literature at Columbia.<sup>47</sup> Better known today as a founding member of the *NAACP*, Spingarn in *Creative Criticism and Other Essays* (1917) and elsewhere reiterated Croce's views (he dedicated his book to the philosopher, whom he called “the most original of all modern thinkers on Art”) and powerfully encouraged those interested in defying the ossified Western literary traditions.

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<sup>47</sup> *Extraordinary Measures* 52-53.

Many of the Imagists found in Spingarn a powerful ally. Referring to him as “that brilliant disciple of Signor Benedetto Croce,” Amy Lowell expressed in 1917 her complete agreement as to the value of judging a work of art, not in terms of its conformity to rigid generic conventions, as she believed many critics were erroneously doing in the United States at the time, but in terms of its own aesthetic values, independent of generic criteria.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, Croce had significantly used the figure of a cultural melting pot—his preferred term was a “crucible,” to be more precise—in talking about the innovation of art and literature, anticipating Israel Zangwill’s play, *The Melting Pot* (1908), which would further popularize the trope in the American context:

It will be observed that expression is sometimes based on other expressions. There are simple and there are *compound* expressions. . . . He who conceives a tragedy puts into a crucible a great quantity, so to say, of impressions: the expressions themselves, conceived on other occasions, are fused together with the new in a single mass, in the same way as we can cast into a smelting furnace formless pieces of bronze and most precious statuettes. Those most precious statuettes must be melted in the same way as the formless bits of bronze, before there can be a new statue. The old expressions must descend again to the level of impressions, in order to be synthetized in a new single expression (34-35; emphasis original).

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<sup>48</sup> *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* viii.

Following his formula, one might say that the impressions inscribed in haiku by classic Japanese poets such as Bashō were to be “synthesized in a new single expression” by modern American poets such as Fletcher and Alexander. These poets accurately understood the supreme value that haiku placed on a suggestive, indirect expression, which fused various impressions that, to be sure, were much more subtle than those typically expressed by bronze statues:

To say that a Hokku is a seventeen syllable poem with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second and five in the last is not enough. There is more, naturally, than its mere form. Its real value is not in its physical directness but its psychological indirectness. (67)

Two-thirds into the article, Alexander departs from Fletcher’s account, and begins to describe the meaning of haiku in his own words, comparing it to “a rain drop with the sun shining on it as it falls.” “[A]lthough it is just a bit of water,” he continues, “it shines, glitters, and sparkles now red, then purple, turquoise-blue, opalescent, and pearl-white.” “The real value of the Hokku,” he concludes, “is not in what is said but what is suggested. The object of the Hokku poet is to impress the reader with the high atmosphere in which he is living. The emotions he expresses are too subtle for words and can only be written in the spaces between the lines as in conversations there are thoughts which the conversants can never convey as they cannot be clothed in speech, being too subtle for words.” As his hokku poems confirm, Alexander clearly believed that hokku could serve as an appropriate vehicle for suggesting the ineffable.

Alexander's blues-like *hokku* and *tanka* acquire a new significance in this context. As I have already suggested, the profound feelings of despair hinted at in such lines as "By the pool of life/ Willows are drooping tonight./ I can see no stars./ What dances in the water?/ O my clouds dripping with tears" and "Death is not cruel/ From what I have seen of life; Nothing remains" evoke the blues singers' brave acceptance of ineffable pain. As Ralph Ellison famously explained:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. . . . ("Richard Wright's Blues" 78-79).

As we shall see in the following chapters, Richard Wright and Sonia Sanchez discovered similar connections between the ineffable subjects of the blues and those of haiku, which were implicit in Alexander's *hokku*. Both of them understood the blues and haiku as similarly embodying poetics of indirectness and indeterminacy, characterized by a resilient celebration of hope and despair, pain and pleasure.

To sum up, one can conclude that Alexander's passion for the "Japanese *hokku*" derived from his aspiration to move beyond the English model. At the same time, his "*Japanese hokku*" series as a whole sought to express not only the beauty of nature but also the ineffable pain of racism. To return to the questions I posed at the beginning of

this chapter, the significance of Alexander's transcultural emulations and adaptations of *hokku* in their own historical context lies in the fact that they challenged the internal as well as external policing of the boundary of African American literature. Like the efforts of some of the Anglo-American imagists in the 1910s who transculturally adapted the classic Japanese (and Chinese) poetics,<sup>49</sup> or those of the Japanese haiku poets around the same period who sought to modernize their own tradition by abolishing the seasonal reference and by experimenting with the newly imported technique of free verse,<sup>50</sup> Alexander's engagement with haiku defied the boundaries

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<sup>49</sup> Recently, a number of critics have compellingly shown the possibility of reading Pound, Lowell, Moore, and Stevens' attempt to emulate the Chinese or Japanese aesthetics, not as simple acts of cultural imperialism, which consumes only the surface of the appropriated texts, but as much more profoundly transformative transcultural phenomena. For more, see Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995) and *Modernism and the Orient* (2012); Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2002); Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (1996); Rupert Arrowsmith, "The Transcultural Roots of Modernism: Imagist Poetry, Japanese Visual Culture, and the Western Museum System" (2011); Paul Stasi, "Cosmopolitan Kulchur: *The Cantos* as World Literature," in *Modernism, Imperialism, and the Historical Sense* 60-81.

For an earlier interests in *haikai* among French poets, see Bertrand Agostini, "The Development of French Haiku in the First Half of the 20th Century: Historical Perspectives." In France, *haikai* is still the preferred name for the form.

<sup>50</sup> In the mid-1910s, Kawahigashi Hekigodō and his disciples such as Nakatsuka Ippekirō, Ogiwara Seisensui, and more famously, Ozaki Hōsai and Taneda Santōka, started to depart from the 5-, 7-, 5 syllabic structure [*teikei*]. Ogiwara even advocated



along the national and color lines, bridging the supposed gap between the East and the West.

As a matter of fact, Alexander's "Japanese hokku" implicitly questioned the very division of the world into the "East and the West" by foregrounding the displaced location of Africa and African America in such a conceptual scheme, complicating all the while the black-and-white dichotomy of the U.S. domestic race-relations. In this sense, Alexander's bold experiments eloquently attest to the crucial but often

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the abolition of the season word from haiku. Starting in the early 1930s, some younger Japanese haiku poets, mainly associated with little magazines such as *Kyodai Haiku* [Kyoto University Haiku Society] and *Haiku Kenkyū* [Studies of Haiku], decisively broke away from the conventions, and stopped using season words altogether [haiku without seasonal references came to be called *mūki*, as opposed to *yūki*]. In 1935, Murō Saisei reviewed Hino Sōjyō's erotic haiku about newlyweds' first night and declared, "Haiku is not a literature just for the old fuddy-duddies!" (qtd. in Tajima 60). Some *haiku* poets in the 30s also wrote explicitly social haiku, referring to Marx, revolution, and fascism in their work. Anticipating the politicization of haiku by African American poets of the 60s onwards, they showed that haiku is *not* inherently asocial or ahistorical, a fact attested by those who wrote *for* as well as *against* the War during the 1930s and 40s. In fact, the members of *Kyodai Haiku* group were all arrested by the military police for their anti-war or allegedly subversive haiku. See Kazuo Tajima, *Shinko haijin no gunzo: "Kyodai haiku" no hikari to kage* [New Haiku Poets: The Rise and Demise of "Kyoto University Haiku Group"] 10-17, 32-40. It is crucial for the particular development of haiku in English, that some of these non-seasonal modern Japanese haiku were not introduced to the West until 1973, when William J. Higginson published *Thistle Brilliant Morning: Shiki, Hekigodō, Santōka, Hōsai* (See Trumbull n.p.).

overlooked history of the cultural negotiations (with Fletcher as a mediator) between Asia and Africa/African America, which led to interesting transcultural hybrids.

As the African American poet's "Japanese hokku" radically destabilize the assumed relationship between race, culture/civilization, and nationality, Alexander's interests in Japan also call for a significant revision of the contour of black internationalism in the 1920s, as it has generally been understood. It is crucial to recall that the Christmas issue of *The Crisis*, in which these *hokku* were printed, also carried Claude McKay's "The Soviet Russia and the Negro." The report was an account of his trip to the Soviet Russia, which was made possible by the Japanese Communist, Sen Katayama, who had been elected to the Executive Committee of the Communist International. In fact, McKay publicizes Katayama's contribution to the African American struggle to the *Crisis* readers: "When Sen Katayama of Japan, the veteran revolutionist, went from the United States to Russia in 1921 he placed the American Negro problem first upon his full agenda. And ever since he has been working unceasingly and unselfishly to promote the cause of the exploited American Negro among the Soviet councils of Russia" (64).<sup>51</sup> The article also included a group photograph of McKay's comrades from all around the world: as the caption reads, "a Chinese, Russian Jews, Negro, Russian gentile, Bulgarian, Hindu, American mulatto, Algerian, Japanese, Armenian, Korean, and white

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<sup>51</sup> See McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (1937): 129-30; Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (2002): 53; Hyman Kublin, *Asian Revolutionary: The Life of Sen Katayama* (1964): 319.

American” (62).<sup>52</sup> In other words, this issue of *The Crisis* embodies the broadening cultural as well as political reach of New Negro transnationalism, which clearly went beyond the dichotomy between black and white in the United States.

The magazine’s editor-in-chief, W. E. B. Du Bois, had long endorsed such a global perspective adopted by McKay’s article, even though the two had infamously disagreed with each other’s literary tastes.<sup>53</sup> As early as in 1900, Du Bois had made an important speech during the first Pan-African Conference in London, where he declared that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, the question as to how far differences of race, which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair, are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation” (“To the Nations of the World” 625). This passage was later revised and made famous in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). As a matter of fact, Du Bois kept reformulating his globally informed color-line thesis throughout his long career. In “The Color Line Belts the World” (1906), for instance, he noted the significance of Japan’s victory over Russian in 1905 as indicating the changing

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<sup>52</sup> For the identity of those in the photograph, see Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (2011): 90-91.

<sup>53</sup> In his notorious review of *Home to Harlem*, Du Bois bitterly remarked that McKay’s novel “for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath” (“The Browsing Reader” 202).

dynamics of the color line:

For the first time in a thousand years a great white nation has measured arms with a colored nation and has been found wanting. The Russo-Japanese has marked an epoch. The magic of the word “white” is already broken, and the Color Line in civilization has been crossed in modern times as it was in the great past. The awakening of the yellow races is certain. The awakening of the brown and the black races will follow in time, no prejudiced student of history can doubt. (34)

The question that interested Du Bois most was whether such an imminent awakening of the darker races would result in a violent conflict with the white race or in a peaceful joint-reconstruction of the world:

Shall the awakening of these sleepy millions be in accordance with, and aided by, the great ideals of white civilization, or in spite of them and against them? This is the problem of the Color Line. Force and fear have marked the white attitude toward darker races; shall this continue or be replaced by Freedom and Friendship? (Ibid.)

For him, the rise of Asia served not only as a wakeup call for the people of African descent but also as a test case to predict the fate of the entire world in the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For more detailed analysis of Du Bois’s relationship to Asia, see Bill V. Mullen, “Breaking the Signifying Chain: A New Blueprint for African-American Literary

As a number of historians have recently demonstrated,<sup>55</sup> Japan's victory over  

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Studies" (2001) and "Du Bois's Afro-Asian Fantasia" in *Afro-Orientalism* (2004). A number of fascinating articles Du Bois wrote on Asia can be found in Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson, eds. *W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line* (2005). The editors provide useful information to contextualize each article in the anthology.

His internationalist romance, *Dark Princess* (1928), has recently been attracting more and more critical attention by scholars interested in Du Bois's global politics against racism. In the novel, Du Bois imagined a violent showdown between the darker and white races rather than a peaceful integration of races around the world. For more on this text, see Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Reproducing Racial Globality: W. E. B. Du Bois and Sexual Politics of Black Internationalism" (2001); Dohra Ahmad, "'More than Romance': Genre and Geography in *Dark Princess*" (2002); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of the Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003): 233-38; Mullen, "Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, and the Afro-Asian International" (2003); Yogita Goyal, "From Double Consciousness to Diaspora: W. E. B. Du Bois and Black Internationalism" in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (2007); William J. Maxwell, "Banjo Meets the Dark Princess: Claude McKay, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Transnational Novels of the Harlem Renaissance" (2007); Madhumita Lahiri, "World Romance: Genre, Internationalism, and W. E. B. Du Bois" (2010); Julia H. Lee, "Nation, Narration, and the Afro-Asian Encounter in W. E. B. Du Bois's *Dark Princess* and Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*." In *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African American and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937* (2011).

<sup>55</sup> See Ernest Allen, Jr., "Waiting for Tojo: The Pro-Japan Vigil of Black Missourians, 1932-43" (1994) and "When Japan Was 'Champion of the Darker Races': Satokata Takahashi and the Flowering of Black Messianic Nationalism" (1994); Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (1998); Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (2000); Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds. *Afro*

Russia in 1905 caused sensation among African Americans, leading some to view the island nation in the East as the “champion of all dark and colored races” (qtd. in Allen 40). In addition to Du Bois, well-known black intellectuals and leaders such as James Weldon Johnson and Booker T. Washington projected their dream for racial equality and justice onto Japan as it began to compete among white world powers in the early twentieth century. While Washington called the Japan’s victory as “A Colored Man’s Dream” (qtd. in Kearney 9), Johnson remarked that Japan was “perhaps the greatest hope for the colored race of the world” (ibid. 57).<sup>56</sup>

Du Bois’s interest in Asia lasted much longer than that of the other early-twentieth-century African American intellectuals. Even after WWII, he had avid interests in Asia. Among other texts on the subject, “Asia in Africa” (1947) is probably the most extensive study Du Bois conducted of the relationship between the peoples of African and Asian descent. Prefiguring the Afrocentric view of world history proposed by Molefi K. Asante<sup>57</sup> and Martin Bernal in the late twentieth century,<sup>58</sup> the article

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*Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*. (2008); and most recently Yuichiro Onishi, *Transpacific Anti-Racism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th-Century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa* (2013).

<sup>56</sup> In “The Cartography of the Black Pacific: James Weldon Johnson’s *Along This Way*” (2007), Etsuko Taketani complicates Johnson’s relationship with Japan by focusing not only on Johnson’s visit to Japan in 1929, but also on the African American’s earlier “troubling role [as a diplomat]” (88) in the toppling of the Nicaraguan government.

<sup>57</sup> See, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980).

<sup>58</sup> See, *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. 3 vols. (1987-2006).

mixes facts and fantasies to prove its thesis: Du Bois cites numerous references to “black” presence in historical as well as ethnological works on Asia to foreground the pre-historic racial interchanges beyond the color lines on the one hand, and the Africans’ contributions to the civilizations around the world on the other. “[S]o for a thousand years,” he concludes, “Asia and African strove together, renewing their spirits and mutually fertilizing their cultures from time to time, in West Asia, North Africa, the Nile valley, and the East Coast” (31).

Nobel Drew Ali, the founder of the first Moorish Temple in Newark, New Jersey, also emphasized the Afro-Asian connection by identifying “Negro” as a branch of the Asian race, thereby reversing Du Bois’s interests in finding “black” presence and legacies in Asia. According to Nathaniel Deutsch, Ali identified African Americans as an “Asiatic Nation of North America.” In his theory, Asian nations scattered around the world—Egyptian, Arabians, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, and the inhabitants of Central and South America—are all descended from the common ancestor, Ham in the Bible.<sup>59</sup>

Deutsch also suggests that the mysterious founder of the Nation of Islam, Fard Muhammad, was not black. Records suggest that he was a biracial son of a Pakistani father and a white British mother from New Zealand (197). Moreover, Deutsch cites Karl Evanzz to suggest that Ali’s theory of “Asiatic Black man” also influenced Elijah Muhammad, who succeeded Fard as the leader of Nation of Islam.

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<sup>59</sup> “The Asiatic Black Man: An African American Orientalism?” 196.

Reginald Kearney also confirms the global perspective of the African American public with a series of newspaper articles, which demonstrate widespread enthusiasm for things Japanese among African American communities across the nation around the turn of the century.

To be sure, black views of Asians, and the Japanese in particular, were certainly not unanimous. Unlike their well-to-do counterparts, some black workers on the West coast during WWII produced negative images of the Japanese as they perceived economic competition between the two groups (Kearney 68-70).<sup>60</sup> As has been noted, race relations between blacks and the Japanese aggravated when Takao Ozawa filed a lawsuit in 1914, claiming the Japanese was Caucasian by race and therefore should qualify for citizenship. *Chicago Defender*, for instance, expressed African American disappointment in the Japanese for “begging to be classed not as a yellow people, but as a branch of the Aryan tree” (ibid. 71). The Supreme Court ruled against Ozawa in 1922, but the decision did not help ease the growing tension between blacks and the Japanese/Japanese Americans. As Japan accelerated its own aggressive expansion into other parts of Asia, A. Philip Randolph, the labor organizer and the first president of The

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<sup>60</sup> For a much more specific and nuanced historicization of the “mutually determining Black and Japanese American trajectories” (11) within the specific location of Los Angeles, see Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (2007); for Chicago, see Jacalyn D. Harden, *Double Cross: Japanese Americans in Black and White Chicago* (2003); for Seattle, Taylor Quintard, “Blacks and Asians in a White City, 1870-1942” (2006).



Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, became one of many black leaders who vehemently criticized its imperial ambitions (ibid. 56).

Richard Wright poignantly articulated such ambivalent feelings of sympathy and envy, hope and distrust, which African Americans harbored towards another colored race in the 1930s:

I've even heard Negroes, in moments of anger and bitterness, praise what Japan is doing in China, not because they believed in oppression (being objects of oppression themselves), but because they would suddenly sense how empty their lives were when looking at the dark faces of Japanese generals in the rotogravure supplements of the Sunday newspapers. They would dream of what it would be like to live in a country where they could forget their color and play a responsible role in the vital processes of the nation's life. ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 860)

As these examples confirm, Asia was anything but an incomprehensible "blank" page to African Americans, as some of Du Bois and Alexander's contemporaries believed.<sup>61</sup> Alexander's "Japanese hokku" should be understood within these cultural

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<sup>61</sup> The boldness of Alexander's adaptation of an Asian literary tradition as well as of Du Bois's global politics is underscored by William S. Turner, who was the dean of Shaw University, the oldest historically black college in the South. In 1925, Turner took part in a debate about the appropriate portrayal of African Americans in drama. Turner rejected the African retention among African Americans and emphasized the complete break with the African heritage in the following terms: "The transition of the Negro from Africa to America involved a sharper break with the past than that experienced by

and political contexts, where Asia occupied a significant place in African Americans' political and cultural imagination.

### III. "Like Buddha—who brown like I am": Asia in the Transracial Writings of Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Marita Bonner, and Jean Toomer

By now it should be clear that Alexander's interests in the culture of the East was by no means "outlandish" in the first half of the twentieth century. Although few other African American poets in the late nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth-centuries sought to emulate Japanese (or other Asian) forms as explicitly and persistently as Alexander did, cultural interests (whether expressed positively or negatively) in Asia were indeed widely shared among African Americans.<sup>62</sup>

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any other race group on this continent. The efficiency of the slave system necessitated as completely as possible the destruction of the Negro's African culture, his family and tribal organization. Africa is as blank to American Negroes as China" ("from Race Drama," Gates and Burton 338).

<sup>62</sup> In *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (1998), Kearney observes the fascination with Japan across the United States: "In black communities about the country, the popularity of the 'Asian Negroes' seemed to shape and encourage Japanese themes in a whole range of activities, gift giving, and entertainment. Black socialites held a great many 'Japanese' activities in order to raise money for churches, orphanages, homes for the elderly, assorted social events, and special projects. While their white counterparts might have held 'Martha Washington teas,' African Americans from Boston to Chicago to Savannah listed Japanese bazaars, Japanese socials, Japanese drills, or Japanese teas among the coming events of the social world. The Japanese

This section will further explore African Americans' representations of Asia in the early twentieth century by focusing on the New Negro women's writings, which reflected and refracted their white counterparts' engagement with Asia. Like the texts of their male counterparts, African American women's writings also foreground the discursive coupling of African Americans and Asians, which, as Claire Jean Kim has shown, should be understood as forming a part of the triangular relationship between whites, blacks and Asians.

In 1895, Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911) published a multiracial and transnational poem entitled "The Present Age." Belying her popular image as the author of *Iola Leroy* (1892), the tragedy of a racially divided mulatta, Harper optimistically sang of the future integration of various nations and races into one human community under the grace of God: "The meek-eyed sons of far Cathay/Are welcome round the board;/ Not greed, nor malice drives away/ These children of our Lord. . . . Japan unbars her long sealed gates/ From islands far away;/ Her sons are lifting up their eyes/ To greet the coming day. . . . To plant the roots of coming years/ In mercy, love and truth;/ And/ bid our weary, saddened earth/ Again renew her youth./ Oh! earnest hearts! toil on

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functions easily were more popular than the occasional Egyptian, Chinese, or Gypsy theme" (14-15). As Elizabeth McHenry has noted, Pauline Hopkins, the secretary of the Women's Era Club, threw a Japanese style tea party to raise enough funds for publishing her novel, *Contending Forces*, in 1899. For more details, see McHenry, *Forgotten Readers* 370, n. 85.

in hope,/ 'Till darkness shrinks from light;/ To fill the earth with peace and joy,/ Let youth and age unite . . .” (172-74).

Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), the cosmopolitan educator who served as the principal of the M Street High in Washington, similarly made references to China and Japan, as well as to Asian Americans, as part of her critique of patriarchy and white supremacy on a global scale. In “Orientalism in Anna Julia Cooper’s Narratives of Modern Black Womanhood,” Helen Heran Jun has convincingly argued that Cooper strategically used the feminized figures of Asia and Asians to imagine and expedite African American women’s liberation. According to Jun’s sympathetic and nuanced reading, Cooper sometimes evoked Asia and Asians problematically, but the rhetorical degradation of Asian women,<sup>63</sup> Jun argues, should not be conflated with a typical Orientalist discourse because it was necessitated by various constraints imposed on her as a black female intellectual in a racist and patriarchal society. “The ideological maneuvers that Cooper must perform in order to advocate for the humanity and entitlement of black women and men,” Jun concludes, “produce numerous contradictions, which are neither an index of Cooper’s inconsistencies nor her presumed

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<sup>63</sup> For instance, Cooper writes in “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration of and Progress of a Race” (1886): “In Oriental countries woman has been uniformly devoted to a life of ignorance, infamy, and complete stagnation. The Chinese shoe of to-day does not more entirely dwarf, cramp, and destroy her physical powers, than have the customs, laws, and social instincts, which from remotest ages have governed our Sister of the East, enervated and blighted her mental and moral life” (53).

ideological ‘shortcomings’ but indicate the discursive constraints in which black female emancipation could be narrated” (*Race for Citizenship* 48).

In her powerful critique of male-chauvinism in the early 1890s, Cooper interestingly mixes her attacks on patriarchy with a scathing commentary on the “greedy and brutality” of Western imperialism, which is distinctly figured as masculine: “Since the idea of order and subordination succumbed to barbarian brawn and brutality in the fifth century, the civilized world has been like a child brought up by his father. It has needed the great mother heart to teach it to be pitiful, to love mercy, to succor the weak and care for the lowly” (“The Higher Education of Women” 74).

In this text, Cooper relentlessly criticized Percival Lowell, a businessman/ an amateur ethnographer who extensively travelled around Asia.<sup>64</sup> Inverting the value of his so-called “civilization,” she referred to Lowell’s ethnographic study of Asia, *Soul of the Far East* (1888), as “this little bit of Barbarian brag” (73), and tore apart the smug condescension of the author’s Eurocentrism. In particular, Cooper attacked Lowell’s vulgar social Darwinism, which led him to predict an impending annihilation of Asians from the face of the earth: “Unless their newly imported ideas really take root, it is from this world that Japanese and Koreans, as well as Chinese, will inevitably be

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<sup>64</sup> For Percival’s influence on his sister, Amy, see David Strauss, *Percival Lowell: The Culture and Science of a Boston Brahmin* (2001); Mari Yoshiwara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (2003): 104-05; Yunte Huang, “Ethnographers-Out-There: Percival Lowell, Ernest Fenollosa, and Florence Ayscough,” in *Transpacific Displacement* 26-59.

excluded.”<sup>65</sup> Cooper’s sarcastic reading of this passage cuts like a sharp knife: “A spectacle to make the gods laugh, truly, to see the scion of an upstart race by one sweep of his generalizing pen consigning to annihilation one-third the inhabitants of the globe—a people whose civilization was hoary headed before the parent elements that begot his race had advanced beyond nebulosity” (74).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For an extended discussion of this passage, see Jun 44-45.

<sup>66</sup> In addition, Cooper’s PhD dissertation, “France’s Attitude toward Slavery during the Revolution,” submitted to Sorbonne, examined issues of race from multiracially comparative perspective (similar to the work of Du Bois, whom she admired): “I had accumulated some notes and comments of my own on the Franco Japanese Treaty of 1896—The Naturalization laws of France: a) for Japanese, b) Hindus, c) Negroes. . . (“The Third Step: Cooper’s Memoir of the Sorbonne Doctorate” 324). Moreover, during WWII, Cooper also expressed her sympathy for the Japanese, but ultimately chose to prioritize her patriotism: “Birth, training and tradition, willy nilly, have made us Americans. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, till death do us part. Here we stand and God help us, we can no other. The leopard cannot change his spots nor the Ethiopian his skin. We cannot afford the open Forum of pure academic reasoning about Nazism, Fascism, Communism or orientalism. The Japanese are a wonderfully progressive people. They are desperately in need of expansion for their rapidly multiplying population, and they are brown. Kagawa their great poet is one of the most saintly characters the world has ever known. All of which goes for nothing with us.

More than a quarter of a century later, Marita Bonner (1899-1971) published “On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored” (1925) in *The Crisis* at the height of the New Negro Renaissance. While Harper and Cooper ultimately upheld the superiority of the American civilization based on the virtues of Christianity, Bonner did not subscribe to such religiously informed patriotism. Her reference to Asia in this sense is quite different from those made by the previous female African American intellectuals.

Told in the second-person narrative voice, Bonner’s essay draws a portrait of a young black woman whose possibilities are constrained by racism and patriarchy. Undaunted by her doubly persecuted position, the narrator/protagonist boldly critiques racism, intra-racial bigotry, snobbism, male chauvinism, as well as the paternalism of white liberals. What is fascinating about Bonner’s essay is that it is not “African” or “(African) American” cultural resources but an Eastern thought that helps the narrator to formulate her counter-hegemonic tactics against the forces that constrain her life.

During the course of the text, the narrator “decide[s] that something is wrong with a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts” (231). With her youthful vigor, she attacks “Anglo-Saxon intelligence [that] is so warped and stunted” (231-32) as the

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Japan has attacked the U. S. A. She is at war with *us*. Admiration for her prowess, sympathy for her cramped natural limitation, even humane ties of Christian brotherhood must be held in abeyance while the war lasts, however painful the process” (“Hitler and the Negro” 263).

source of her problems. This critique then leads to the denunciation and rejection of the very foundations of the Western civilization, Greek and Roman cultures:

You wonder and you wonder until you wander out into Infinity, where—if it is to be found anywhere—Truth really exists. The Greeks had possessions, culture. They were lost because they did not understand. The Roman owned more than anyone else. Trampled under the heel of Vandals and Civilization, because they would not understand. Greeks. Did not understand. Romans.

Would not understand. “They.” Will not understand. (233)

The narrator goes on to explain how “[the Greeks and Romans] have shut Wisdom up and have forgotten to find the key that will let her out.” The missing key turns out to be “her twin sister, Understanding” (233). Unlike her white counterparts, Bonner’s narrator knows that only through the patient detour through “Understanding” can she reach “Wisdom.” Her daring rejection of the Western ways to pursue “Wisdom” imaginatively takes her to the East:

You must sit quietly without a chip. . . . Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands. Motionless on the outside. But on the inside?  
  
Silent.



Still . . . “Perhaps Buddha is a woman.”

So you too. . . . With a smile, ever so slight, at the eye so that Life will flow into and not by you. And you can gather, as it passes, the essences, the overtones, the tints, the shadows; draw understanding to yourself. (234)

For those who might hastily mistake her radically patient posture for inertia, the narrator has a surprising ending: “And then you can, when Time is ripe, swoop to your feet—at your full height—at a single gesture. Ready to go where? Why. . . . Wherever God motions” (234).<sup>67</sup>

Bonner’s figurative self-refashioning is echoed by no other than Du Bois, who in the aforementioned article quotes at length G. Massey’s claim, in his 1881 *A Book of the Beginnings*, about the black origin of Buddha: “It is certain that the Black Buddha of India was imaged in the Negroid type. In the black Negro God, whether called Buddha or Sut-Nahsi we have a datum. They carry their color in the proof of their origin. The people who first fashioned and worshipped the divine image in the Negroid mould of humanity must, according to all knowledge of human nature, have been Negroes themselves. For blackness is not merely mystical, the features and hair of Buddha belong to the black race and Nahsi is Negro name. The genetrix represented as the Dea Multi-mammia, the Diana of Ephesus, is found as a black figure, nor is the hue mystical

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<sup>67</sup> In her classic, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston also compares her African American heroine to “the Empress of Japan” (250).

only, for the features are Negroid as were those of the black Isis in Egypt” (qtd. in “The Color Line Belts the World” 10).

Anticipating Du Bois’s theory, the foremost Western authority of Japanese and Chinese art in the late nineteenth century, Ernest F. Fenollosa, had also pointed out a striking resemblance between some representations of Buddha and the people of African descent: “This Buddha must be taken, in lack of any other such perfect specimen, to be the type of Suiko bronze Buddhas, and probably not far from the type of fifth-century Go Buddhas. The head, though uncrowned, is far too heavy and square, the features seemingly Indian, but almost negro.”<sup>68</sup>

Much more relevant for our discussion is the well-known association of Buddha with the modernist writer, Gertrude Stein. Apart from the fact that both Stein and Bonner went to Radcliffe (albeit a quarter of a century apart from each other),<sup>69</sup> the Jewish American and the African American women are linked rather unexpectedly by their common association with the Eastern deity. When the cubist sculptor, Jacques Lipchitz met Stein in Paris, he “was particularly impressed by her resemblance to a fat, smooth, imperturbable Buddha.”<sup>70</sup> When he produced a bronze bust of Stein in 1920, the final product, as many commentators have noted, looked positively “Asian.” Similarly, Jo Davidson did a bronze sculpture of the writer in a mediating pose, as she

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<sup>68</sup> *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline of History of Asiatic Design*. Vols. I and II 80.

<sup>69</sup> Stein attended the college from 1893 to 97; Bonner from 1918 to 22.

<sup>70</sup> *My Life in Sculpture* 23.

later recalled, with Buddha in mind: “To do a head of Gertrude Stein was not enough—there was so much more to her than that. So I did a seated figure of her—a sort of modern Buddha.”<sup>71</sup> Alluding to Davison’s sculpture of Stein, Edmond Wilson sarcastically commented on the author’s idiosyncratic style in “A Guide to Gertrude Stein,” which appeared in the September 1923 issue of *Vanity Fair*: “We figure her as the great pyramidal Buddha of Mr. Jo Davidson’s statue, ruminating eternally on the ebb and flow of life, *registering impressions like some August seismograph*. And we cannot but regret that the results of her meditations are in oracles” (80; italics original).

In addition, when Ernest Hemingway was reeling from dysentery while hunting near Tanganyika, he wondered if he was not really suffering from what he calls a “Buddha syndrome”: “I became convinced that though an unbeliever I had been chosen as the one to bear our Lord Buddha when he should be born again on earth.” Instead of leading him to think of reincarnation, the image of Buddha reminded him of the face of his old friend: “[w]hile flattered at this,” Hemingway “wondered how much Buddha at that age would resemble Gertrude Stein.”<sup>72</sup>

Given such a recurring comparison of Stein to Buddha, one is tempted to speculate whether Bonner’s impersonation of Buddha might indeed reflect her desire to identify

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<sup>71</sup> Qtd. in Susan Holbrook and Thomas Dilworth, eds., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein & Virgil Thomson* 42.

<sup>72</sup> “A.D. in Africa: A Tanganyika Letter (Esquire, April 1934),” in *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*. n.p. Also see Lyle Larsen, *Stein and Hemingway: The Story of a Turbulent Friendship* 113.

herself with the doyenne of Modernism. Although no critic in the past has pointed out a possible connection between the two authors, Bonner's "On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored" (1925) is in fact very much Steinian in style. Just like Stein's incantatory prose, Bonner's writing makes use of the repetition of words that creates music rather than meaning. Note the repetition of "you" at the beginning of "On Being Young," which cannot help remind the reader of the almost "childish" manner that Werner Sollors has identified as Stein's idiosyncratic stylistic innovation.<sup>73</sup>

You start out after you have gone from kindergarten to sheepskin covered  
with sundry Latin phrases.

At least you know what you want life to give you. A career as fixed and as  
calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys. Time.  
Time to do things. A house that can be as delectably out of order and as easily  
put in order as the doll-house of "playing-house" days. And of course, a  
husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself. . . . You  
wonder and you wonder until you wander out into Infinity. . . . (230; 233)

Could Stein's "Melanctha" in *Three Lives* (1909) have influenced Bonner just as it did Richard Wright?<sup>74</sup>

Since there is no known record in which Bonner explicitly mentions Stein, one can only wonder as to the definite literary connection between the two authors. But if

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<sup>73</sup> *Ethnic Modernism* 19.

<sup>74</sup> For Stein's influence on Wright, see Lynn M. Weiss, *Stein and Wright: Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism*.

Bonner's attraction to the figure of Buddha turns out to have little to do with Stein's direct influence on her, it will then be necessary to look for other sources to answer where and how the African American author might have learned about the Eastern God in the first place. One feasible answer to these questions may be found in Georgia Douglas Johnson's weekly literary salon, better known as "The Saturday Nighters" in Washington, D. C. In the 1920s, both Bonner and Alexander were active participants of this literary community.<sup>75</sup> As Ronald M. Johnson notes, "the gathering of the Saturday Nighters provided many of those involved with a sense of participation on the black renaissance of the 1920's. The participation helped individuals like [Willis] Richardson, Alexander, and, of course, Johnson herself to face the peculiar vicissitudes of a segregated society, including the indifference of their peers among the capital's black middle class" (497). Gwendolyn Bennett, a poet-artist who had drawn the aforementioned cover of the December issue of *The Crisis* in 1923, also visited the salon in 1927. In "Ebony Flute," a column she regularly published on *Opportunity*, she provided an informative report of the meeting: "The *Saturday Nighters* of Washington, D. C., met on June fourth at the home of Mrs. Georgia Douglas Johnson. Mr. Charles S. Johnson was the guest of honor. . . . The company as a whole was charming a medley. . . . Lewis Alexander with jovial tales of this thing and that as well as a new poem or two which he read; Marita Bonner with her quiet dignity" (212). It is no doubt

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<sup>75</sup> See McHenry 239; Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* 166.

that “this thing and that” and “a new poem or two” included Alexander’s *hokku* poems.

Bonner must have surely shared his passion for the cultures of the East as she sat

“quietly like Buddha.”

V. “*Overnight our voice and our hearing have not shrunk into an eye*”:

Jean Toomer’s Ambivalence towards Asia and His Quarrel with Imagism

It is also worth mentioning at this point that another member of the Saturday Nighters had avid if complicated interests in the cultures of the East. During his frequent returns to Douglas’s salon, it is more than likely that Jean Toomer debated the merits and demerits of adapting Asian literary tradition with Alexander and Bonner.<sup>76</sup>

The significant if ambivalent role of Asia in Toomer’s poetics is encapsulated in his 1921 review of Richard Aldington’s *The Art of Poetry*. In the review, Toomer seeks to define the social role of poetry, which anticipated the public debate initiated by Du Bois several years later.<sup>77</sup> Notice how Toomer subtly revises the Imagist poet’s

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<sup>76</sup> As Ronald M. Johnson notes, Toomer had already left his native home in Washington when the Saturday Nighters was launched. Still, Toomer often returned to the city and frequently participated in the lively discussion about literature, art, and politics with the regular members of the group (493-94).

<sup>77</sup> See Du Bois, “Negro in Art: How Shall He be Portrayed?” (1926). Du Bois’s main concern in conducting the survey was with the political dimensions of the literature and arts by, of, for the “Negro,” or as he put it more bluntly, with the (in)appropriateness of propaganda in art. Intellectuals and artists, both white and black, who responded to his questionnaire were unanimously opposed to the use of literature and arts as propaganda.

“art-for-art’s-sake” argument. He begins by agreeing with Aldington’s thesis that the “purpose of poetry is not ethical.” Aldington uses the adjective “ethical” to refer to ascetic Puritanical values, and Toomer initially upholds the Imagist’s critique of the obsolescence of Anglo-Saxonism: the poet must be the polar opposite of the moralist. For he believes that “[a]ny single purpose would limit [poetry], and thus degrade it from an art form to that analogous to the pulpit.”<sup>78</sup> The function of poetry, according to Toomer, is to “expand” life. The true poet—his example is Walt Whitman—can “expand, elevate, and enrich” life with “the vigor of his thoughts and the beauty of his expression.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the initial agreement, the difference between Toomer and Aldington becomes soon unmistakable when the former takes issue with the Imagist’s another thesis—“the old cant of a poet’s ‘message’ is now completely discredited.”<sup>80</sup> Aldington rejects not only Puritan ethics but also the edifying function of literature. Toomer vehemently disagrees with the Imagist on this point:

These are certainly remarkable times we are living in. Transformations occur  
that leave the nature which produced a fish eye from nothing aghast. We of

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However, just as Toomer does here, many rejected the art-for-the-art’s sake argument in one way or another. Toomer here mainly talks about the aesthetics and ethics of American poetry, but his argument has larger implications for (African) American literature and art.

<sup>78</sup> “Richard Aldington’s ‘The Art of Poetry’” 4.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 4.

the Western world, whose thoughts have been shaped and moulded by the poets from Plato (Goethe, Ibsen, etc.) to Whitman suddenly roll on our backs with our face towards China and the Chinese. Charmed by their pictorial, suggestive loveliness we no longer hear the mighty voices of the past. Or rather, we hear them, but as a tired man hears a symphony; there is an auditory titillation, but no soul expansion—the spirit is too weary to respond.<sup>81</sup>

Toomer equates the Chinese aesthetics that informed Aldington's Imagist poetics as decorative, flat, too obsessed with the aesthetic surface, and not concerned enough with ethical depth. In Toomer's view, the post-WWI Western poetry, at least its Imagist branch conceived by Aldington, is therefore misguidedly and irresponsibly turning to an "alien" cultural source for rejuvenation. While carefully drawing a boundary between himself and Aldington, he continues:

I have used "we." I think it would be nearer the truth to say "they." By "they" meaning [Aldington] and similar ones whose eyes are so charmed and fascinated by the gem, by its outward appearance, by its external form, that the spirit behind them is not perceived. An exquisite image is preferred to a rousing message. Which is perfectly all right. *I simply say that I do not*

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 4.



*believe such an attitude characteristic either of the Western poets or of their readers. Overnight our voice and our hearing have not shrunk into an eye.*<sup>82</sup>

Putting aside his racial identity, Toomer assumes the mantle of the Western poetic tradition and draws a line between “we” and “they” according to aesthetic filiation. This is a remarkable identification, not least because the poet/critic Allen Tate (1899-1979) in 1924, three years after this review, would patronizingly argue that in the future “the complete assimilation of American culture *will* equip the Negro with ‘refinement’ and ‘taste’ requisite to writing *in a tradition utterly alien to his temperament.*”<sup>83</sup>

To be sure, Toomer does not dismiss what he perceives as the “Chinese” aesthetic as inferior simply for being “alien” to the Western tradition. A cultural relativist, he instead insists that the Western poetic tradition, to which he relates himself and Aldington, has historically placed more emphasis on the voice and the hearing rather than on the eye and the visual. There is no reason, Toomer argues, why the Western poets should abandon their tradition and “suddenly roll on our backs with our face towards China and the Chinese.”

Toomer’s posthumously published autobiographical writings complicate his negative reaction to the Eastern aesthetics. In “The *Cane* Years,” he recalls an intensive

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 4; emphasis mine.

<sup>83</sup> Qtd. in Nielsen 15; emphasis mine. Richard Wright would later concisely articulate African American’s “historical and psychological” position within the West as “not non-Western” (705): “Yet, I’m not non-Western. I’m no enemy of the West. Neither am I an Easterner. . . . I see both worlds from another and third point of view . . .” (705).

period of reading non-literary texts. For eight months, he stopped reading literature and explored Eastern religion, philosophy, occultism, and theosophy. The timing is significant, for this was right before he began writing most of the poems and short stories that went into *Cane*. Despite his growing interest in the spirituality of the East at the time, however, Toomer was dissatisfied with the poor quality of the books he was reading though it's unclear whether he thought the ideas themselves were inadequate or that it was their promoters or translators in the West who failed to perceive the "spirit" of the East:

I came in contact with an entirely new body of ideas. Buddhist philosophy, the Eastern teachings, occultism, theosophy. Much of the writing itself seemed to me to be poorly done; and I was certain that the majority of the authors of these books had only third or fourth-rate minds, or less. But I extracted the ideas from their settings, and they seemed to me among the most extraordinary I had ever heard. . . . *I tried several of the exercises; but then, abruptly stopped them. I concluded they were not for me. In general, I concluded that all of that was not for me.* . . . But I had profited in many ways by my excursion. The Eastern World, the ancient scriptures had been brought to my notice.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> "The *Cane* Years" 119-20; emphasis mine.

After having an exotic and esoteric taste of the non-West and of the non-orthodox and having concluded that “all of that was not for me,”<sup>85</sup> Toomer tells us that he came back from the *alien* land to the “earth and literature,” that is, to the West and Western literature.<sup>86</sup>

When Toomer went back to his intensive reading of the Western tradition, two groups attracted his attention. The first group was represented by Robert Frost (1874-1963) and Sherwood Anderson, whom he described as the “Americans who were dealing with local materials in a poetic way.” The other group consisted of no other than Imagists. Notice here, despite his critique of their “message-less” poetry, he was more positive towards their experiment as a whole: “[T]he poem and program of the Imagists. Their insistence on fresh vision and on the perfect clean economical line was just what I had been looking for. I began feeling that I had in my hands the tools for my own creation.”<sup>87</sup> Read together, the review and the autobiographical writing suggest that Toomer indeed learned from the Imagist aesthetic and technique but felt it necessary to

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<sup>85</sup> Despite his initial disappointment in non-Western spirituality, Toomer would soon fatefully encounter the teachings of the Russian psychologist/spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff. For Toomer’s Gurdjieff connection, see Byrd’s *Jean Toomer’s Years with Gurdjieff*, Woodson, and McKay 179-201.

<sup>86</sup> Toomer describes the journey as follows: “I was in this physical, tangible, earthly world, and I knew little enough of it. It was the part of wisdom to learn more and to be able to do more in this, before I began exploring and adventuring into other worlds. So I came back to earth and literature” (“The *Cane* Years” 119).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 120.

*retool* them so that they would enable him to capture, instead of the surface beauty or the inaccessible “spirit” of the East, what he viewed as *this-worldly* vision of an emerging new America.

In “The First American” (c.1920), Toomer had already begun to articulate his vision of a new world in Whitmanesque terms of total inclusion:<sup>88</sup>

*I had observed what seemed to me to be authentic—namely, that a new type of man was arising in this country—not European, not African, not Asiatic—but American. And in this American I saw the division mended, the differences reconciled—saw that (1) we would in truth be a united people existing in the United States, saw that (2) we would in truth be once again members of a united human race.*<sup>89</sup>

To articulate this democratic “message,” more “beautifully” and “vigorously,” he struggled with “the difficulties and problems of learning the craft and art of writing.”<sup>90</sup>

When Toomer finally managed to write *Cane* (1923), he fascinatingly blurred the racial identity of the light-skinned protagonist in the mid-section of the book entitled, “Bona and Paul”: “What is he, a Spaniard, an Indian, an Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu, or a Japanese?” (74). Furthermore, “Withered Skin of Berries,” written around the same

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 125. To Frank, Toomer insisted that his vision was not just “fine words . . . unrelated to reality” but an “actuality” (125). He later revised “The First American” to produce “The Blue Meridian” (1936).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 121; italics original.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 120.

period, Toomer also evoked a composite, ambiguous figure of the Japanese. Early in the story, Carl, the white boyfriend of the African American protagonist, Vera, who is passing as white, takes her on a drive through the nation's capital. What unfolds is a multi-layered panorama of American history:

Driving down Seventeenth Street, Carl only spoke to call the name of buildings. That was the Corcoran Gallery of Art, that, is the Pan-American building. Negroes were working on the basin of an artificial lake that was to spread its smooth glass surface before Lincoln's Memorial. The shadow of their emancipator stirred them neither to bitterness nor awe. The scene was a photograph on Vera's eye-balls. (141)

In the capital, art (Corcoran Gallery) meets industry (Pan-American building), machine (car) meets the human (African American workers), the past meets the present (African American workers participating in the completion of the Lincoln Memorial). This is an idealized picture of modern pluralist America at peace. Just as the bloody memory of the Civil War has faded, so has the excitement of the Emancipation evaporated: descendants of slaves feel "neither bitterness nor awe" at the statue of Lincoln.

Though the narrative initially represents the memories of the Civil War and of the Emancipation as quickly fading, the reader soon learns "the old past" still haunts the present, but through a unlikely mediator of the Japanese:

Carl was concentrated on the road. . . . The exotic fragrance of cherry blossoms reached them, slightly rancid as it mingled with the odor of

exploded gasoline. As they passed the crescent line of blossomed trees, a group of Japanese, hats off, were seen reverently lost in race memories of reed lutes, jet black eyebrows, and jeweled palanquins. Consciously, the episode meant nothing to Vera. But an unprecedented nostalgia, a promise of awakening, making her feel faint, clutched her throat almost to stricture, and made her swallow hard. . . . A word was struggling with her throat.<sup>91</sup>

The supposed “race memories” of the Japanese under the cherry trees evoke in the African American heroine her own history: “Curious for her, lines of a poem came unbidden to her mind” (141). What comes out of her mouth is a poem of mourning for the dead soldiers: “far-off trees/ Whose gloom is rounded like the hives of bees/ All humming peace to soldiers who have gone” (141). As a crucial if mysterious mediator, the figure of the Japanese thus triggers Vera’s own process of remembering the forgotten past.

The specter of the Japanese appears again during a drive through the city, but this time with Dave, the dark-skinned poet of unknown racial identity, at the wheel. The enigmatic poet is represented as an uncanny embodiment of the things repressed, whose “words tasted of blood and copper” (155). The poem quoted above, the reader learns, belongs to him. While their car passes by the cherry trees, Vera worries that her throat might be choked again with her “race memories.” Unaware of Vera’s anxiety, Dave

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

cries out, “Look, the cherry trees. I have seen them bloom. I have seen Japanese in reverence beneath them” (156):

“Lafcadio Hearn—“

“‘Lafcadio,’ that is a soft word, David.”

“You are sensitive—“

“Oh to so many things if I would only let myself be.”

“Lafcadio Hearn tells of how the Japanese visit regions where the trees are blooming, much as we go to the mountain or the sea, drawn by their fragrance. It is hard to think of them succumbing to gaudy show and blare like our Americans at Atlantic City.”

In this dialogue, the Japanese, mediated by the Irish-Greek writer,<sup>92</sup> serves as a sign for the delicate and the sensitive, the opposite of the “gaudy show and blare” of “our Americans at Atlantic City.” Knowing little of Dave’s history or world-view, Vera double-checks his patriotism:

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<sup>92</sup> In a fascinating intersection of literary lives, Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), the Greek-Anglo-Irish writer best known for his writings/translations of Japanese horror tales, turns out to be the translator of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (original 1874; translation 1910), a version which Toomer read and on which he based his judgment of the French writer. Although I cannot go into the details about the fascinating commonalities between the two writers, suffice it to point out that Toomer’s ambivalence towards the English translation of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* interestingly foreshadowed his mixed feelings of admiration and inaccessibility about Hearn’s pictorial style and his chosen subject, the Oriental Japan, as well.

“You do not like Americans, David?”

“Do you feel Americans apart from you?”

“Answer my question first.”

“One does not dislike when one is living. Life is inconceivable except in relation to its surrounding forms. I love.”

(156)

In this enigmatic exchange, Dave fantasizes about the Japanese or the Japanese aesthetics as an alternative to those of the United States. When he is forced by Vera to spell out his feelings, Dave (prefiguring Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*)<sup>93</sup> ultimately pledges his allegiance to the nation, which he feels he is *part of* as well as *apart from* simultaneously.

What should one make of these seemingly inscrutable but persistent evocations of the Japanese in Toomer’s writings? Although there is not enough evidence to define precisely his interest in Asia in general and in the Japanese in particular, it is certain that his writing was reflecting and refracting the general fascination with the East in the West at the time. More important for the current discussion is the fact that his repeated reference to Asia, while inscribing its alterity, unmistakably shared the New Negroes’ desire to find meaningful commonality between the West and the East, to reframe the issues of race in the United States from a global perspective. This desire is clearly

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<sup>93</sup> The eponymous protagonist of Ellison’s novel pledges allegiance to his nation towards the end of the novel, “Weren’t we [African Americans] part of them [white Americans] as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died? (575).



suggested, for instance, in Dave's allusion to Hearn, in which the Japanese sensibility to natural beauty is recognized and appreciated from the American perspective. Although the Japanese and the Americans ("our Americans at Atlantic City") are put in opposition on one level, Dave in fact acknowledges the similarity between the two groups on another level: "how the Japanese visit regions where the trees are blooming, *much as we* go to the mountain or the sea, drawn by their fragrance." While sometimes identifying and at other times dis-identifying with what he perceives as Asian sensibilities, Toomer explored the paradoxical workings of race, which sometimes appeared rigid and at other times elusively flexible.

As I have suggested, on numerous Saturdays in Johnson's salon, Toomer must have surely debated with Alexander the suitability of Asian literary forms to articulate their (African) American poetic voice. Again there is no record which would tell us precisely how Toomer reacted to Alexander's "Japanese Hokku," which were published in the same year as his magnum opus, *Cane*. Although what they did talk about remains inaccessible to us, it is certain that Asia significantly informed the poetics of these and other New Negro authors.

#### IV. Alain Locke: The (Dis-) Location of Asia in the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance

I have demonstrated how African American authors and intellectuals' interests in Asian cultural traditions reflected as well as refracted those of the Anglo-modernists. In this

section, I will discuss white modernists' engagement with Asia in more detail and then try to distinguish how the central figure of the New Negro Renaissance, Alain Locke, sought to direct the trajectory of the movement.

As Zhaoming Qian in *Orientalism and Modernism* has noted, interests in Chinese and Japanese poetics (not to mention their arts and religions) were high among Anglo-American modernist poets during the 1910s and 20s.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, translations as well as adaptations of Chinese and Japanese poetry proliferated. To name just a few, there were Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915); Lafcadio Hearn's *Japanese Lyrics* (1915); Arthur Waley's *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (1919) and *More Translations from the Chinese* (1919). Yone Noguchi published five *hokku* in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* (Nov. 1919; 67) followed by a book entitled *Japanese Hokkus* (1920).<sup>95</sup> Jun

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<sup>94</sup> Numerous little magazines, which were the significant catalysts of Modernism, sustained these interests in the East. As Qian notes, "an inspection of the 1918-20 issues of half a dozen magazines reveals an extraordinary amount of attention given to [Arthur] Waley's translations [of Chinese poetry]. Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, for instance, featured ten of Waley's Chinese pomes, including one by Bo Juyi ("On Barbarous Modern Instruments"), in February 1918 and two reviews of his books—one by John Gould Fletcher and one by Harriet Monroe herself—in February 1919 and March 1920, respectively. *Future* carried perhaps the earliest review of Waley's first book by Pound in November 1918. *The Dial* advertised *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* in May 1919" (129-30).

<sup>95</sup> For the significance of Noguchi in the rise of Anglo-American modernism, see Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism: From Spatial Narrative to Jazz Haiku* (2006) and Anita Patterson, "Global America Revisited: Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, and Modernist *Japonisme*" (2011). Despite its title, Hakutani's book curiously sidesteps the New Negro Renaissance/the Harlem

Fujita also had eight of his tanka in *Poetry* (Nov. 1919; 68-69). As his initial interests shifted from Japan to China, Pound came to believe that he had stumbled upon an ancient poetic foundation upon which he could build new edifices for the modern times.<sup>96</sup>

It is well known that many of the early twentieth-century Western poets and artists interested in the “exotic” traditions of Asia were similarly fascinated with what they viewed as the “primitive” cultures of Africa. As Lorenzo Thomas has noted, for instance, “The New Poetry movement of the first decade of the century,” led by Harriet Monroe in Chicago and William Stanley Braithwaite in Boston, had overlapping interests both in Africa and Asia, and beyond.<sup>97</sup>

Witter (Hal) Bynner (1881-1968), one of the forgotten figures of the “New Poetry Movement,” illustrates this convergence of literary and cultural interests. Perhaps best-known for his “Spectra Hoax”<sup>98</sup> of 1917, which parodied Imagism, or for his 1947

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Renaissance, and begins to draw parallels between African American literature and haiku with Richard Wright.

<sup>96</sup> Describing China as a “new Greece,” he declared, “China is fundamental, Japan is not. Japan is a special interest, like Provence, or 12-13th century Italy (apart from Dante) . . . . But China is solid” (qtd. in Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism* 18-19).

<sup>97</sup> “The interest in Asian poetry paralleled visual artists’ curiosity about African and Polynesian sculpture and, later—led by Mary Austin, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Witter Bynner—a similar infatuation with Native American cultural artifacts. Encouragement from Monroe’s *Poetry* resulted in an anthology of translations and “interpretation” of American Indian poetry published by Boni and Liveright in 1918 . . . .” (52).

<sup>98</sup> With Arthur Davison Ficke, Bynner parodied Imagism and published a series of

poem, “Defeat,”<sup>99</sup> which powerfully criticized segregation,<sup>100</sup> Harvard-educated poet/editor played an important but critically neglected role during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>101</sup> The creation of the national Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Contest (sponsored by the Poetry Society of America) is the case in point.<sup>102</sup> In 1924, Bynner, along with his fellow judges Carl Sandburg and Alice Corbin, gave Countee Cullen the second prize for his “Ballad of the Brown Girl: An Old Ballad Retold.”<sup>103</sup> To show his appreciation, Cullen dedicated the poem to Bynner when it was later published in a book form. It is strange that no scholar of the Renaissance seems to recognize Bynner’s role in promoting young African American poets, especially when nearly all of the biographers mention Cullen’s winning of the prize as an important event in his career. Similarly, Bynner’s role in promoting Langston Hughes’s career is

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poems (with a manifesto to boot) as a part of fake poetry movement called Spectra. For more details, see Suzanne W. Churchill, “The Lying Game: *Others* and the Great Spectra Hoax of 1917.”

<sup>99</sup> Langston Hughes approvingly quotes the entire poem in “Trouble on the Home Front” 103.

<sup>100</sup> The speaker witnesses German prisoners on a train to Texas. They are treated equally to white Americans, “while black and American soldiers sit apart, / The white men eating meat, the black men heart” (12).

<sup>101</sup> For the most comprehensive account of his life, see James Kraft, *Who is Witter Bynner?: A Biography* (1995).

<sup>102</sup> The Library of Congress continues to provide Witter Bynner Fellowships (sponsored by the Witter Bynner Foundation) to two chosen poets per year.

<sup>103</sup> See, Lois Brown, “*Ballad of the Brown Girl, The: An Old Ballad Retold* Countee Cullen”; Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood, “Countée Cullen” in *Blacks at Harvard* 241; Huggins 161.

also unforgotten, despite the fact the poet's ambition was boosted when he won the first prize in the same contest, only two years after Cullen did.<sup>104</sup> When *Opportunity* began to hold its annual literary contest in 1925, the crucial year for the New Negro Renaissance, Bynner also served as one of the interracial group of judges, along with Edward Bok, Charles Chesnutt, Sinclair Lewis, Robert Morss Lovett, Van Wyck Brooks, Carl Van Doren, Zona Gale, James Weldon Johnson, and Eugene O'Neill.<sup>105</sup>

Bynner's forgotten contribution to the Renaissance acquires further significance because of his overlapping interests in black America and Asia. In 1917, Bynner went to Japan and China for four months. In 1920 to 21, he went back to China. From this point on, Bynner began to establish himself as an authoritative translator of Chinese classics. In 1929, he translated Kian Kang-Hu's *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology: Being Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty 618–906*. In 1944, another translation, *The Way of Life According to Laotzu*, appeared. This was followed by *Tao Te Ching—The Way of Life According to Laotzu* in 1949.

In addition to these translations, Bynner taught poetry at Berkeley in the 1920s. One of his former students, Idella Purnell would go on to launch a bi-monthly magazine of verse, *Palms* (1923-30), from Guadalajara, Mexico. As one of the contributing editors, Bynner would help Purnell, who was only twenty-one years old at the time of the

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<sup>104</sup> Brown, "Ballad" 22; Johnson and Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics* 73.

<sup>105</sup> For more details about the *Opportunity* prize, see Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, eds. *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance History* xxxiii.

magazine's founding.<sup>106</sup> It is only natural to assume that Purnell listened to Bynner's advice when she invited Countee Cullen to guest-edit the October 1926 special issue of *Palm*, which was dedicated to black poetry. Notably, Cullen picked Alexander's "A Collection of Japanese Hokku" in his selection for the volume.<sup>107</sup>

Like Bynner, Ezra Pound showed overlapping interest in Asia, Africa, and African America. As Yunte Huang has shown, his interest in Leo Frobenius's work on Africa and in Ernest Fenollosa's work on Asia were interweaved (*Transpacific Displacement* 91). In fact, his letter to T. S. Eliot in 1940, written in a mock-black dialect, made a "pair" of Frobenius and Fenollosa (Huang 91) as Pound searched for an appropriate methodical tool to study the "morphology of cultures":

I know you jib at China and Frobenius cause they ain't pie church; and neither of us likes sabages, black habits, etc. However, for yr. enlightenment, Frazer worked largely from documents. Frob. went to things, memories still in the spoken tradition, etc. His students had to *see* and be able to draw objects. All of which follows up Fabre *and* the Fenollosa "Essay on Written Character."<sup>108</sup>

Just as Pound showed overlapping interests in Africa (Frobenius) and Asia (Fenollosa),

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<sup>106</sup> See Johnson and Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics* 72-74, 216-17 n.23. For more biographical information on Purnell and the bibliographical data on *Palms*, see the webpage of "Idella Purnell Stone and Palms: An Inventory of Materials" at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>107</sup> According to Eleonore van Notten, the 1,000 copies of the "Negro issue" were instantly sold out (155). See also, Martin, "Lewis Alexander" n.p.

<sup>108</sup> "370: To T. S. Eliot." *The Selected Letter of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*. 336. For Pound's appropriation of black speech, see Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*.

some of the New Negro intellectuals, as has been noted, were avidly studying the history and cultures of Asia. This point bears special emphasis. For, even though critics and historians have recently been working hard to foreground the diasporic dimensions of African American literature in the early twentieth-century, the critical history of the Harlem Renaissance still largely assumes the New Negro's ignorance of or indifference to Asia.

Let us take the telling example of George Hutchinson's magisterial work, *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995). Hutchinson compellingly refutes the claims previously made by David Levering Lewis and Houston Baker, Jr. that blacks and whites during the Renaissance were in nothing but an exploitive relationship with each other. On the contrary, he reveals the fundamentally interracial nature of cultural and literary production of the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In his account, white intellectuals, patrons, editors, and publishers were genuinely sympathetic and committed to the racial advancement of African Americans. Moreover, these figures played crucial roles in institutionally upholding the Renaissance (despite some undeniable traces of racial ideology in their thinking and practice).<sup>109</sup> Another point emphasized by Hutchinson is that African Americans were formulating various permutations of their "New Negro" identities, at a time when their white counterparts, the group known as "Young Americans,"<sup>110</sup> were also in the process of producing

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<sup>109</sup> Like other historians who have written on the Renaissance, however, Hutchinson does not do justice to Bynner's contribution to the movement.

<sup>110</sup> The group included Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis

heterogeneous and often competing images of “America,” “Americans,” and “American culture/civilization.” Not surprisingly, the frustration with the WASP/ Puritanical hegemony brought these two groups together.

Hutchinson also views Franz Boas’s anthropology, whose cultural relativism powerfully challenged Eurocentrism, as having had a decisive impact on many African Americans: Du Bois abandoned his romantic racialism upon encountering Boasian anthropology and frequently printed the anthropologist’s articles in *The Crisis*; as is well-known, Zora Neale Hurston collected African American and Caribbean folktales under his supervision; Boas also helped Arthur Huff Fauset, the brother of Jessie Fauset, the literary editor of *The Crisis*, to secure funding for him to study anthropology and psychology at Columbia.<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, both white and black students and admirers of the pragmatists, William James, and John Dewey<sup>112</sup> also endorsed a new “America” that was radically transnational, plural and open to diversity against the nativist chorus of “100% Americanism” in the 1920s. For instance, Du Bois viewed James as a valuable mentor in Harvard years, basing his decision to drop philosophy and pursue sociology instead. The representative figures of the era, such as Horace Kallen, Alain Locke, Randolph Bourne, Robert Park, and Charles S. Johnson were also influenced by the pragmatist

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Mumford.

<sup>111</sup> As Hutchinson perceptively notes, despite his so-called relativism, Boas was far from being politically neutral. He showed an unflinching commitment to the preservation and expansion of democratic equality around the world. See 64-70.

<sup>112</sup> Hutchinson 45-61, 87-89.



philosophy. According to Hutchinson, pragmatism was particularly crucial for Locke, who emphasized “the central role of aesthetic experience in the achievement of new forms of solidarity and understanding, and thus in the transformation and national integration of cultures” (90).

Instead of reverting to transhistorical racial essentialism or subscribing to its easy transcendence, Hutchinson convincingly historicizes the crucial trinity of race, culture, and nationalism in the re-making of America in the 1920s. The proper understanding of the Harlem Renaissance/the New Negro Movement and the so-called “American modernism,” he argues, “requires a recognition of the national (and therefore hybrid) character of our racial identities as well as the racial character of our American identities, for the national subconscious affects our feelings of ‘race’ as surely as the ‘racial’ subconscious affects our ideas of the American nation.”

Belying his emphasis on black-and-white interracialism, Hutchinson includes a few key references to Asia in relation to the transcultural making of a pluralist counter-aesthetic to the nativist, parochial discourse of the United States during the 1920s and 30s. For instance, Hutchinson examines two articles written by Dewey during his 26-months sojourn in China from May 1919 to July 1921. His arrival coincided with the May Fourth Movement, a massive student-led national protest against Japanese imperialism, more specifically, against Japan’s appropriation of Shandon/Shantung from Germany as a result of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and the corruption within the Chinese government. Dewey excitedly reported on the event in “The Sequel of the Student Revolt,” which was published in *New Republic* in 1920. In

fact, as Jessica Ching-Sze Wang in *John Dewey and China* (2007) has suggested, had he not been so fascinated by what he unexpectedly witnessed there, he might not have stayed in China for as long as he did.

*The May Fourth Movement* was a pivotal point in China's modernization, as its call for domestic reform was both political as well as cultural. It is also worth noting that Hu Shih, a former student of Dewey at Columbia, played a vital role not only in bringing his former teacher to his homeland but also in spearheading the Movement. It cannot be emphasized enough that Shih was at the center of a campaign to replace classical Chinese, the limited access to which had been increasingly considered undemocratic, with *bai hua*, the vernacular language, as the standard for print. Drawing a parallel between Dewey's interest in the *bai hua* literature of the Young China (he viewed this as nothing less than a "literary revolution")<sup>113</sup> and his equally keen desire to see the growth of a vernacular American literature, as expressed in "Americanism and Localism" (1920),<sup>114</sup> Hutchinson hints at this particularly global dimension of American modernism and the New Negro Renaissance, but does not further explore it.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> "The Sequel of the Student Revolt" 24.

<sup>114</sup> This article was also written in China and published in *Dial*, see Hutchinson 115-17.

<sup>115</sup> On similar promotions of the vernacular languages in print in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the breath-taking proliferation of intercultural literary exchanges, see Karen Thornber, *Empire of Texts in Motion: Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese Transculturations of Japanese Literature* 16-17, 113, 172.

While the impact of Russian literature and the Irish Renaissance on the New Negro intellectuals and writers has been well-documented, much more work is necessary for the historians of the New Negro Renaissance to make a full sense of the connection between their subject and the *May Fourth Movement*.<sup>116</sup> No place is more appropriate to begin such an inquiry than Locke's Foreword to *The New Negro* in 1925. In the manifesto of the New Negro Renaissance, the perimeter Locke sets for the Renaissance is fundamentally international:

Enlarging this stage [Harlem] we are now presenting the New Negro in a national and even international scope. Although there are few centers than can be pointed out approximating Harlem's significance, the full significance of that even is a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale.

That is why our comparison is taken with those nascent movements of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world to-day. . . . As in India, in China, in Egypt, Ireland, Russia, Bohemia, Palestine and Mexico, we are witnessing the resurgence of a people . . .

Locke's understanding of "the resurgence of a people" in China is no doubt informed by the series of articles Dewey sent home across the Pacific. Moreover, it should be more widely recognized that Dewey's stay in China (and his earlier visit to Japan) was made possible in the first place through the financial support of Albert C. Barnes, a multimillionaire amateur art critic Hutchison identifies as someone "upon whom Locke

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<sup>116</sup> Hutchinson 111-12, 158, 162, 260; Tracy Mishkin, *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances: Language, Identity, and Representation*.

and *Opportunity* relied as their house expert on African aesthetics and its relation to European modernism.” “Locke,” Hutchinson notes, “even called upon Barnes to contribute to *The New Negro* [“Negro Art and America”], and he borrowed his views of African art wholesale from the irascible manufacturer (who later tried to get Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett to accuse Locke of plagiarism” (45).<sup>117</sup> As a respected critic of African art and a patron of the New Negro Renaissance, Barnes mediated the significant cultural link between Africa, African America, and Asia, promoting the investigation of the current affairs abroad while popularizing marginalized or underappreciated cultural traditions (at home and overseas).

There is another track left unexplored by Hutchinson. He mentions Josiah Royce and his notion of “wholesome provincialism” and examines its influence on the Lockean formulation of cultural pluralism (41, 81-84). Preceding Dewey’s celebration of the local and the vernacular against the increasing threat of modernization qua homogenization across the nation, and even around the world, Royce’s influential piece, “Provincialism” (1902), had endorsed “a wise provincialism” (73), perceptively distinguishing the good localism from the bad.<sup>118</sup> Upon encountering the Roycean ideal

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<sup>117</sup> See Wang 3-4. In the fall of 1918, Dewey was on his sabbatical from Columbia and teaching at Berkeley, when he was invited to Japan for a lecture tour. Upon hearing the plan, Hu Shih then asked his former teacher to do a one-year residency in China. Dewey was financially too strained to make either trip, had it not been for Barnes’ intervention. His friend offered a deal to cover the expenses in the form of a monthly stipend as long as Dewey would “make a report on Japan as a factor in the future international relations” (qtd. in Wang 4).

<sup>118</sup> See Werner Sollors, Ch.6 “The Ethics of Wholesome Provincialism” in *Beyond*

of the perfect balance between loyalty to one's "province" ("local pride") and the refusal of ethnocentrism ("a mere boast"),<sup>119</sup> Locke abandoned his early desire for assimilation and formulated "cultural racialism," which lay at the heart of his New Negro aesthetic (81-83).

Of particular interest for our discussion is Royce's reference to China and Japan in his theorization of "a wise provincialism" ("Provincialism" 91). In "Race Questions and Prejudices," he argued that "Chinese civilization, and, in recent times, Japanese civilization have shown us that one need not be a Caucasian in order to originate a higher type of wisdom" (64). What struck Royce in particular was Japan's ability to imitate and adapt the Western civilization without losing its own identity:

With a curious and on the whole not unjust spiritual wiliness, [the Japanese] has learned indeed our lesson, but he has given it his own interpretation. . . . [H]e remains absolutely his own master with regard to the interpretation, the use, the possession of all spiritual gifts, as if he were the master and you the learner. He accepts the gifts, but their place in his national and individual life is his own. And we now begin to see that the feature of the Japanese nationality as a member of the civilized company of nations is to be something quite unique and independent. Well, let the Japanese give us a lesson in the spirit of true provincialism. Provincialism does not mean a lack of plasticity, an unteachable spirit; it means a determination to use the

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*Ethnicity*, esp. 174-181.

<sup>119</sup> "Provincialism" 89.

spiritual gifts that come to us from abroad in our own way and with reference to the ideals of our own social order. (91).

The legendary street-corner orator in Harlem, Hubert H. Harrison, echoed this sentiment. In “Education and the Race” (1925), he encouraged African Americans to model themselves after the Japanese:

In this respect we must pattern ourselves after the Japanese who have gone to school to Europe but have never used Europe’s education to make the apes of Europe’s culture. They have absorbed, adopted, transformed, and utilized, and we Negroes must do the same. . . . Let us, like the Japanese, become a race of knowledge-getters, preserving our racial soul, but digesting into it all that we can glean or grasp, so that when Israel goes up out of bondage he will be “skilled in all the learning of the Egyptian” and competent to control his destiny (107;109)

In his essays on discrimination and provincialism, Royce, however, made numerous rhetorical concessions to racist ideology: “the negro has so far shown none of the great powers of the Japanese. Let us, then, provisionally admit at this stage of our discussion that the negro is in his present backward state as a race, for reasons which are not due merely to circumstances, but which are quite innate in his mental constitution” (51).

Even though Locke, and apparently Harrison, admired the theory of “wise provincialism,” it is clear that Locke felt it necessary to dispel Royce’s suspicion about the “innate” disabilities and the supposed “backward state” of black people. In a series of essays, Locke indeed persistently critiqued what he called the “[i]rrelevant evaluation

and invidious comparisons that do not even make the pretense of establishing either parity or equivalences of values.”<sup>120</sup>

For instance, “African Art: Classic Style” extols the neglected aesthetic values of African art and compares it to its Asian counterparts, which in his view had already made their marks on the Western art world:

Even if we consider the well-known virtuosity of Oriental art in this field, with these Gold Coast miniature gold masks, ivory talismans, and small brass weights of every conceivable variety and technical versatility, Africa enters the lists as a respectable contender in a field that until recently was thought to be an Oriental monopoly. (196-97)

In similar terms, Locke celebrated African aesthetic values in “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”:

As it is, African art has influenced modern art most considerably. It has been the most influential exotic art of our era, *Chinese and Japanese art not excepted*. The African art object, a half generation ago the most neglected of ethnological curios, is now universally recognized as a “notable instance of plastic representation,” a genuine work of art, masterful over its material in a powerful simplicity of conception, design and effect. This artistic discovery of

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<sup>120</sup> Among others, see “Race Contacts and Interracial Relations”; “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”; “African Art: Classic Style”; “The Colonial Literature of France”; “Special Sections: When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts”; “A Functional View of Value Ultimates”; “A Functional View of Value Ultimates”; “Pluralism and Ideological Peace.”

African art came at a time when there was a marked decadence and sterility in certain forms of European plastic art expression, due to generations of the inbreeding of style and idiom. (189; italics mine)

In “Race Contacts and Inter-Racial Relations,” Locke directly takes on Royce’s challenge. In his view, “all modern civilizations are ‘assimilative’” rather “spontaneous.” He believes that the world on the whole is moving towards a common civilization based on the value of utility. Once this form of world unification is accomplished, however, he predicts that “a more stable and diversified culture grouping may reappear.” To illustrate his point, Locke compares and contrasts the “Negro” with the Japanese, but unlike Royce, whose formulation he partially reiterates in the article, Locke sees no “innate” differences between these groups: “the Negro and the Japanese [are] both biologically adaptable, and socially imitative; the Japanese in their contact with western civilization have made a reservation in favor of their own racial tradition, and have adopted for the most part only the ‘utilities’ of modern civilization; the Negro, being denied this through slavery, makes in America no reservation, and is on the way to complete culture assimilation” (258-59). Whatever differences African Americans and the Japanese may have manifested so far, Locke insists, those differences are nothing but the contingent products of history rather than inevitable facts of biology.

In 1945, Locke retrospectively summarized the modernist movement, of which the New Negro Renaissance was a crucial part, as a still-ongoing project to realize a cosmopolitan pluralism. For him, an ideal society should emerge out of disparate cultural idioms and forms, that is, through a democratic dialogue, and never through



aggression. Here again, Locke registers the significance of “Oriental Art” as having made a decisive blow to Eurocentrism in art:

Incidentally this widening of the range of appreciation and participation is as good an example as we can find of what democratization can mean in a value field. First our exposure to Oriental art with its markedly different idioms and form criteria inaugurated the artistic value revolution we call modernism. The appreciative understanding and creative use of the formerly strange and to us unaesthetic idioms of African and other primitive art followed, and a revolutionary revision of taste and creative outlook was fully on.<sup>121</sup>

Two years later, Locke dedicated “Pluralism and Ideological Peace” to his close friend Horace Kallen. What interests us more is the fact Locke in this article refers to a recent publication of another Harvard alumnus, F. S. C. Northrop. Northrop’s *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding* (1946) opened Locke’s eyes to a Buddhist pluralism:

F. S. C. Northrop, who so brilliantly and suggestively has attempted to bridge the great ideological divide between the Occident and the Orient, is quite right in calling this pluralistic and relativistic approach “realism with respect to ideals.” . . . Interestingly enough, Northrop discovers an analogous relativistic strain in Oriental thought [to the recent rise of “the new intercultural internationalism” in the West], one that is, in his estimation, of surprising strength and long standing, since it stems from the heart of Buddhist

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<sup>121</sup> “A Functional View of Value Ultimates” 485.

philosophy. Much older and deeper-rooted than our Occidental pluralism, it accounts, Northrop thinks, for Buddhism's wide tolerance and effective catholicity. In its more enlightened followers, he says, Buddhist teaching has "a fundamental and characteristic open-mindedness, in fact a positive welcoming of religious and philosophical doctrines other than its own, with an attendant tolerance that has enabled Buddhism to infiltrate almost the whole range of Eastern cultures without disrupting them or losing its own characteristic identity." (568-69)

This passage is worth quoting at length, for Locke's objective was not to celebrate the Eastern formulation of pluralism above and beyond its Western counterparts. More than anything else, he was interested in drawing the best democratic model out of the convergence of different cultural currents.

"Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace" (1944), an earlier writing which Locke quotes in this article, clarifies his relativist position:

It may well be that at this point relativism has its great historical chance. It may be destined to have its day in the channeling of human progress, not, however, as a mere philosophy or abstract theory, though it began as such, but as a new base and technique for the study and understanding of human cultures and a new way of controlling through education our attitudes toward various group cultures, beginning with our own. For only through having some objective and factual base in the sciences of man and society, can cultural relativism implement itself for this task of reconstructing our basic

social and cultural loyalties by lifting them, through some radically new perspective, to a plane of enlarged mutual understanding. (570)

Locke's cosmopolitan pluralism is articulated here as a concrete democratic principal of social organization and intercultural understanding. Reflecting his earlier conversion into Bahá'í Faith in 1918,<sup>122</sup> these pronouncements compel us to revise the current critical evaluation of the New Negro Movement and to reimagine its philosophy and perspective as fundamentally transcultural and transcivilizational.

The next chapter will examine the politics and poetics of Richard Wright and continue to explore the transnational/cosmopolitan currents in African American imagination, which were enriched by the unique contributions of such New Negroes as Alexander, Du Bois, Harper, Bonner, Toomer, and Locke.

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<sup>122</sup> See Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* 63-65.

## Chapter 2

“Could This Melody/ Be Sung in Other Countries/ By Other Birds?”:

Richard Wright’s Transcultural Remaking of Haiku and the Blues

*A world of grief and pain:*

*Flowers bloom;*

*Even then. . .*

Kobayashi Issa, *Hachiban nikki*, 1819.

*When the feeling and fact of being a Negro is accepted fully into the consciousness of a Negro, there’s something universal about it, something saving and informing, something that lifts it above being a Negro in America. Oh, will I ever have the strength and courage to tell what I feel and think; and do I know it well enough to tell it.*

—Richard Wright, a journal entry, February 12th, 1945.<sup>123</sup>

### I. Introduction: African American Literature Beyond the United States and Richard Wright’s Vision of “De-Occidentalization” Beside the Rhetoric of Violence

On 28th November 1960, Richard Wright at the age of 52 suddenly died of a heart attack during his self-imposed exile in Paris. His untimely death raised some suspicions among his friends of the CIA’s involvement. As classified files later revealed, he was indeed on the US Intelligence Agency’s watch list at the time of his death, just as he had

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<sup>123</sup> Qtd. in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* 274. Hereafter *UQ*.

been earlier under the FBI's close surveillance in the United States. Since his body was never autopsied, however, there is no conclusive evidence to show that there was any foul play on the part of the US government.<sup>124</sup> It is most likely, as many of his biographers agree, that Wright died from the cardiac damage caused by bismuth, a (soon-to-be-banned) substance prescribed for amoebic dysentery, which the author is believed to have caught during a recent trip to Africa or Asia.<sup>125</sup>

Beginning with his sudden hospitalization on August 22nd, 1959, just over a year before his eventual death, Wright surprised his friends and family with his rekindled interest in poetry. Upon hearing the news that Wright was again writing poems, his close friend, Dorothy Padmore, wrote from Ghana on February 16th, 1960: "It does seem odd that you should be indulging in poetry. That always seems to me a youthful indulgence" (qtd. in Rowley 506). The poetic form with which the African American author was now experimenting turned out to be perhaps even more unexpected and outlandish to many who knew him in person or through his books. Rather than returning to the lyrical free verse of his youth or to the political revolutionary poetry of his Communist days, Wright was now immersing himself in the world of haiku.<sup>126</sup> Lying

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<sup>124</sup> For instance, see Fabre, *UQ* 521-31. For various harassments the CIA inflicted on Wright, see Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* 275-76.

<sup>125</sup> Fabre, *UQ* 521-31; Rowley 504, 588, n. 68; Jianqing Zheng, *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku* x.

<sup>126</sup> Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* 386-87, 393-94; Fabre, *UQ* 505-12, and "The Poetry of Richard Wright," which is also reprinted as "From Revolutionary Poetry to Haiku"; Rowley 505-07; Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Richard Wright: From Black Boy to World Citizen* 175-76.

on his hospital bed, he began to produce one haiku after another as if a floodgate had opened inside him and all the pent-up lyricism and humor began to pour out, albeit through the rigid syllabic channels of 5-7-5. Even after he was discharged from the hospital, Wright kept carving out one verbal gem after another, at home, at cafes and in restaurants around Paris, sometimes using paper napkins as his notebook.<sup>127</sup> Within a few months, as many as 4,000 haiku were born. Wright numbered them and began to select and revise the most vivid and compelling ones for a future publication. For instance, the haiku 1093 reads:

I warrant a law:  
All the world's telephone wires  
Belong to sparrows.<sup>128</sup>

In the final manuscript, completed only six months before his death,<sup>129</sup> Wright added a certain depth to this subtly humorous poem. The revised version, numbered 14, made the connection between the narrator and the birds more explicit by giving voice to the narrator's ebullience, which spilled over into the world:

I grant to sparrows  
The telegraph wires that brought

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<sup>127</sup> Julia Wright vii.

<sup>128</sup> Richard Wright Papers, Box 70 Folder 836.

<sup>129</sup> It was a pure coincidence that Wright passed away on the 266th anniversary of Matsuo Bashō's death (1644-1694). I thank Ryoichi Yamane for pointing this out to me.

Me such good tidings!<sup>130</sup>

At the initial stage of editing, Wright invited a typist to his apartment to make a copy of his handwritten notes. He would then paste the typed poems on cardboards. To cull the best images from the still large bunch, he would hang them from steel rods and study them carefully while lying on his bed.<sup>131</sup> This intermittent editing process apparently fitted his physically weakened condition well. Trying to reach for perfection, he also shuffled the order of the poems, according to their moods, themes, and seasons, although the final manuscript somehow did away with the scheme based on seasons. Wright consciously aimed for certain effects such as “dissonance,” “relational-illusion,” “pathos,” “arrival,” “mystic/cryptic images,” “time/timelessness,” “argument,” “absence.”<sup>132</sup> The self-reflexive haiku that eventually became 224, for instance, emphasizes the absence of smell:

While convalescing,  
The red roses have no smell,  
As though mocking me.<sup>133</sup>

Here the temporary disability of a sensory organ works as a synecdoche of the

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<sup>130</sup> All the published haiku are numbered and can be found in Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (1998). For a much more disenchanted reading of the poem that suggests a kind of rivalry between the poet and the birds, see Richard A. Iadonisi, “I Am Nobody: The Haiku of Richard Wright” 77-78.

<sup>131</sup> Webb 393; Fabre, *UQ* 508.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Wright Papers, Box 70 Folder 832.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

narrator's ill health. Just as in the case of 14, one can see a significant difference in the mood in the final version of this haiku. The patient's frustration at slow recovery is now replaced with what seems to be a calm acceptance of his/her sick but improving state:

While convalescing,  
The red roses have no smell  
Gently mocking me. (224)

By mid-April 1960, Wright's haiku had been further reduced to 817. As he was about to finish editing the manuscript, Wright wrote to Margrit de Sablonière, his Dutch translator. His letter conveys excitement tinged with anxiety: "These haikus, as you know, were written out of my illness. I was, and am, so damnably sensitive. Never was I so sensitive as when my intestines were raw. So along came that Japanese poetry and harnessed this nervous energy. Maybe I'm all wrong about them. Maybe they have no value, but I will see."<sup>134</sup>

On June 8th, 1960, just after sending his manuscript to a prospective publisher, Wright wrote to Paul Reynolds, his long-time literary agent and sympathetic friend, apologizing for failing to have consulted him in advance: "Listen, today I've sent to William Targ of World Publishers a ms. of poems. Now I did not send you this little ms. first . . . because I feel that it has no commercial value. And I don't know if you would want to handle poetry or not. . . . These poems are the result of my being in bed a great deal and it is likely that they are bad. I don't know. But don't get worried that I'm going

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<sup>134</sup> qtd. in Fabre, *UQ* 508.



daft. I'm turning back to fiction now."<sup>135</sup> The haiku manuscript was rejected in the end, but as these letters suggest, Wright must have been hardly surprised at the news, even if he was disappointed.

In spite of the long critical indifference to Wright's haiku, let alone his own uncertainty about it, the growing body of scholarship on the subject is beginning to recognize their transcultural significance.<sup>136</sup> If Wright's creative adaptations of haiku were not commercially viable in the early 60s, they should be of interest to scholars not only of (African) American literature, but also of postcolonial literature, world literature and comparative literature today. For the transnational and transracial dimensions of these poems enable us to see how imaginatively a minority writer/poet in the West can and has indeed translated, transferred and reformulated the structure of feeling and

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<sup>135</sup> qtd. in Webb 394.

<sup>136</sup> Thanks to Hakutani Yoshinobu and Robert Tener, Wright's haiku manuscript was posthumously published as *Haiku: This Other World* in 1998. Since then, a total of 817 of his haiku have become easily accessible to the general readers and critics. So far, two critical anthologies, *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku* (2011) and *Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Literature: West Meets East* (2011), edited by Jianqing Zheng and Hakutani respectively, have offered long-overdue reevaluations of this rich and yet-to-be fully explored body of work. Most of the critical essays published so far on the subject can be found in Zheng's edited volume. Apart from these, see Eugene E. Miller's excellent chapter in *Voices of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (1995) as well as Floyd Ogburn, Jr., "Richard Wright's Unpublished Haiku." In addition, Werner Sollors has offered an insightful analysis of Wright's haiku as constituting a prehistory of the thematic and formal expansion witnessed in contemporary African American literature ("Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro").

thought historically rooted in another cultural community while universalizing particular cultural style associated with his own group. Wright's haiku poetry encourages us to revise the racialized binary thinking implicit even in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s notion of "signifying,"<sup>137</sup> a distinctly "black" appropriation/parody of ("black" and "white") cultural traditions. My overall argument in this dissertation is that we need to reconstruct numerous cultural influences that have gone into the creation and renovation of African American literature, that is, to go beyond the black-white binary as well as the parochial discourse of black "authenticity" that still too often haunt the studies of African American literature.

I argue that Wright's unexpected encounter with the non-Western poetic tradition, followed by his self-reflexive return to the "black"/ blues form, enabled him to imagine an alternative "interpretive community" (Fish 147-74) by temporarily *bracketing*, *suspending*, or *putting aside* race, even as he boldly continued to fight against racism till the very end of his life. For instance, Wright's blues-inspired poetry, like his haiku, attests to his global and what I call "para-racial" aesthetic and political concerns. Just like his haiku, "The Blues of the Hunted" illustrates my point perfectly, for it powerfully addresses the trauma of a WWII veteran whose racial and national identity remains indeterminate. The desire and imperative to preserve and share memories and histories of oppression, violence, and struggle associated with particular groups with a larger global community of readers powerfully motivate this blues-inspired poem about the race-transcending trauma of WWII.

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<sup>137</sup> See *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988).

In the following pages, I will first briefly review Wright's literary career after his emigration to France while paying attention to his changing racial/national identification. This, I hope, will set the stage for a detailed analysis of his haiku- and blues-inspired poetry. Despite enduring associations with the rhetoric of violence throughout his life, this chapter explores the possibility that Wright in his very last months embraced a poetics of disarmament as a cosmopolitan poet, and by doing so managed to free himself, however briefly, from a chain reaction of violence and counter-violence. Belying the conventional image of Wright as a rebellious writer of violence, his haiku focused on healing and catharsis rather than on conflict and violence. His blues-inspired poetry also departed from his earlier writings. While adhering to the generic themes, such as pain and fear arising from American racism, his late blues-inspired poems addressed issues that were not explicitly racialized, that is, not exclusively concerned with African Americans or with American racism. Wright's introduction to Paul Oliver's academic study of the blues tradition, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960), also helps us to understand the increasingly transnational/transracial perspective that Wright adopted in reevaluating and remaking the supposedly "authentic" African American cultural expression. Despite the efforts of a handful of committed scholars such as Michel Fabre, Eugene E. Miller, Hakutani Yoshinobu, Jianqing Zheng and others, Wright's late poems, especially haiku, still remain marginalized within his larger oeuvre. Nevertheless, these poems compel us to read his life, politics and poetics from perspectives that are much more global and transcultural than generally assumed.

## II. Beyond the “Frog Perspectives” towards a Poetics of De-Occidentalization and Disarmament

Wright’s choice to move permanently to France in 1947 certainly made his already conflicted relationship with United States much more volatile; at the same time, the very distance from the U.S. psychologically liberated Wright from the limitations that race and racism had imposed on him. The positive outcome of this newly found freedom in France was his increasing self-identification as a transcultural cosmopolitan with a global perspective that enabled him to see the world *beyond*, or at least *beside*, race and the nation state. Wright’s haiku- and blues-inspired poems produced just before his death in 1960 particularly reflected this newly acquired perspective. Arising from vastly different historical and cultural locations as they did, the African American author’s swan songs in the forms of haiku- and blues-inspired poetry critically sublimated cultural particularity based on race and the nation state by instantiating—quite unlike his militant politics of decolonization—what I shall call his poetics of de-Occidentalization and disarmament, which performatively corroborated his globally reconstructed African American identity.

Wright first used the word “de-Occidentalization” in 1955. When a French daily asked the celebrated African American author at the peak of his fame to fill in a questionnaire—which included a question “To you, what is the historical date most charged with significance?”—Wright did not choose, as one might expect, 1857 (*Dred Scott v. Sanford*, which took away legal rights and citizenship from African Americans),

1865 (the abolition of slavery in the U.S.), 1896 (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, which institutionalized the “separate but equal” policy by law) or 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*, which mandated the end of segregation in public schools), but instead wrote: “The 1905 victory of the Japanese over Russia. That date marked the beginning of the termination of the Godlike role which the Western white man had been playing to mankind. That date marked the beginning of the de-Occidentalization of the world.”<sup>138</sup>

In *The Color Curtain* (1956), a report on the landmark meeting of African and Asian leaders at Bandung in 1955, Wright further elaborated on his neologism. The “de-Occidentalization of mankind” (594), he now explained, meant nothing less than an end of the “supremacy of the Western world” (594) in all dimensions of life—from the political and economic to the cultural. He hoped that “in time, the whole world will be de-Occidentalized,” and “there will be no East or West!” (594). When this decolonizing, democratizing and implicitly socialist process was finally completed, Wright believed that the hierarchical boundaries between races, classes, cultures, and civilizations would be once and for all erased, and a new world would be born, without racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and parochial ethno-racial chauvinism.

A year later, Wright dedicated *White Man, Listen!* (1957) to the leaders of Africa, Asia, and the West Indies. According to Wright, these “Westernized non-Westerners”

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<sup>138</sup> “Richard Wright: I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word ‘Politics’” 165. For more on the wide-spread and enthusiastic reactions of African American intellectuals, press, and the general public to the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05, see Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (1998).

were to be his fellow travellers in the long and arduous journey toward a postcolonial, transnational, and transracial utopia. At present, however, he thought that they were little more than “the lonely outsiders who exist precariously/ on the clifflike margins of many cultures” (633). Nevertheless, he believed them to be the chosen ones “who amidst confusion and stagnation, / seek desperately for a home for their hearts:/ a home which, if found, could be a home for the hearts of all men” (633). Expanding and re-articulating on the global scale what W. E. B. Du Bois had famously theorized as African Americans’ “double consciousness,”<sup>139</sup> he argued that these Western-educated leaders of non-Western nations have a special office to perform, for “[t]hey knew the West from the *outside*; and now they saw and felt their own society from the *outside*.”<sup>140</sup> In short, Wright suggested that their liminality in-between the West and the non-West had given them an alternative vision, “a third but not quite yet clearly defined point of view.”<sup>141</sup>

Obviously, Wright was projecting his own globalizing consciousness on these Westernized non-Westerners:

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<sup>139</sup> In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois famously describes the conflicted psychological life of African Americans: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (11).

<sup>140</sup> *White Man, Listen!* 787; italics original.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

First of all, my position is a split one. I'm black. I'm a man of the West.

These hard facts are bound to condition, to some degree, my outlook. I see and understand the West; but I also see and understand the non- or anti-Western point of view. . . . This double vision of mine stems from my being a product of Western civilization and from my racial identity . . . Being a Negro living in a white Western Christian society, I've never been allowed to blend, in a natural and healthy manner, with the culture and civilization of the West. This contradiction of being both Western and a man of color creates a psychological distance, so to speak, between me and my environment. . . .

I'm not non-Western. I'm no enemy of the West. Neither am I an Easterner. . . . I see both worlds from another and third point of view.<sup>142</sup>

Having been marginalized within the West, Wright identified himself as an insider/outsider who sought to break the racial barrier and become an intermediary between cultures and civilizations, between the West and the non-West, in search for a cosmopolitan "home," a utopia beyond race, class and the nation-state.

At first glance, Wright's vision may seem overly optimistic and even naïve. One might point out that he elides the profound political and cultural differences among

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 704-06. Wright similarly wrote of the forced duality of his identity in the following terms: "Since I'm detached from, because of racial conditions, the West, why do I bother to call myself Western at all? What is it that prompts me to make an identification with the West despite the contradiction involved? The fact is that I really have no choice in the matter. Historical forces more powerful than I am have shaped me as a Westerner" (707).

Asians, Africans, West Indians, and African Americans, let alone internal diversities and conflicts within these groups.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, his (many will no doubt call “elitist”) blueprint for a de-Occidentalized world is abstract and devoid of a practical program for creating a society (whether the projected model may be labeled as “multicultural” or “cultural pluralist”) that would endorse cultural diversity. Like all utopian fantasies, missing in his top-down vision are the concrete and practical policies and strategies to disseminate and democratize the transnational and transracial perspective that he vaguely imagined, not to mention the ways in which it might be put into action. After all, his “third point of view,” as Wright himself admitted, was “not quite yet clearly defined.”

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<sup>143</sup> For a critique of the romanticism projected on the Bandung Conference, see Aijaz Ahmad, “Three Worlds Theory: End of a Debate” in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1994). For the failures of postcolonial states in the post-Bandung era, see Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), especially 5. As I shall argue, however, the typical criticism of romanticism surrounding decolonization applies to *The Color Curtain* only to a limited extent. In my view, Wright does not subscribe to the kind of uncritical euphoria characterized by myopia and naiveté that Ahmad criticizes. As a matter of fact, Wright makes a point of amply foregrounding internal diversity and conflicts among the representatives at the Bandung Conference. In other words, it is crucial, I believe, to reconsider the (historically/retrospectively confirmed) limits of Wright’s utopian aspirations so that we might recuperate from his vision theoretical and practical insights with which to better engage with enduring contradictions of racism, ethnocentrism, imperialism and globalization that Wright addressed over half a century ago. For Wright’s ambivalence about identifying with people of color in the Third World, see Harilaos Stecopoulos, “Mississippi on the Pacific: William Faulkner and Richard Wright.” *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*. 126-59.



Filling up part of this void in Wright's utopian vision is precisely the goal of this chapter. During the tumultuous period of his life in which his racial and political identities went through a series of fundamental changes, I argue that Wright's transcultural<sup>144</sup> remaking of haiku and blues enabled him at once to articulate and practice his "third point of view" in a concrete form, to live and write (however fleetingly) a dream of freedom that no longer imposed calcified cultural/civilizational boundaries between the races, both in the West and the non-West.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> As Mary Louise Pratt has noted, the term "transculturation" was coined by Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s in his pioneering ethnomusicological study of Afro-Cuban culture. Uruguayan writer/critic Angel Rama subsequently popularized the term in the 1970s. According to Pratt, Ortiz sought to replace the reductive binary of "acculturation" and "deculturation" in talking about the cultures of European colonies by introducing this new concept, which accounted for various forms of cultural mixing. See Pratt 244, n4. More recently, Vijay Prashad and Eric Liu, speaking from radically different political positions, have proposed similar ideas with new labels: "polyculturalism" (Prashad 65-69) and "omniculturalism" (Liu 39) are meant to replace the essentializing identitarian logic of multiculturalism, where each culture in the mix remains more or less coherent and discrete.

<sup>145</sup> In addition, it should be noted that most of the human subjects featured in his haiku and blues-inspired poetry are the working-class, the kind of people (unlike Westernized non-Western presidents, party leaders, and intellectuals that Wright in the 1950s viewed as the primary agents of de-Occidentalization). Even if the ex-communist Wright, near the end of his life, no longer explicitly designated these black and white everyday people (farmers, servants, cleaners, washers, soldiers, not to mention sex workers) as primary agents of global reform/revolution, these poems do confirm that he continued to identify closely with the working-class, whom he had first memorably celebrated in *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941).

As Michel Fabre and Paul Gilroy,<sup>146</sup> among others, have noted, Wright felt increasingly freed from daily reminders of race and racism ever since his migration to France in 1947. This new sense of freedom and security made him more and more concerned with problems shared by every man and woman living in the modern condition.<sup>147</sup> *The Outsider* (1953) was his first conscious literary expression of this growing interest in the questions of “modernity at large” (Appadurai). Exploring the Kierkegaardian themes of dread and alienation in modern life, the existential novel concretely relates these themes to the specific experiences of social marginalization, simultaneously involving race, class, and gender. While the novel continues to criticize racism, its anti-hero, Cross Damon, is emphatically identified as someone whose actions have “no racial tone” (109). When a catastrophic train wreck gives him a chance to start his life all over again with a new identity, freed from all his previous entanglements [his failed marriage, his lover’s unexpected pregnancy, etc.], the narrator states that “he was just a man, *any* man who had had an opportunity to flee and had sized upon it” (109; emphasis original). Cross is also explicitly represented as an “outsider” in search for fellow “rebels with whom he could feel at home,” not because they are “born black and poor” (35). For Cross, African Americans are united because of “a situationally defensive solidarity that possessed no validity save that occasioned by the latent pressure of white hostility” (153).

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<sup>146</sup> See Fabre, *UQ* 365-81; Gilroy, “‘Without the Consolation of Tears’: Richard Wright, France, and the Ambivalence of Community,” in *The Black Atlantic* 146-86.

<sup>147</sup> See Gilroy, *Against Race* 284.

Of course, Cross cannot be so simply identified with Richard Wright. After all, he is represented by the author as an unsympathetic protagonist: a serial murderer in cold blood. In the novel, the hunchbacked white district attorney of New York better articulates the author's future vision for African Americans as they moved closer to integration:

Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to *know* that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them. Negroes will develop unique and specially defined psychological types. They will become psychological men, like the Jews. . . . They will not only be Americans or Negroes . . . . (163-64; emphasis original)

As a matter of fact, Wright by this time had already begun to expand his "double vision" on a global scale to deal with "the big problem—the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it" (qtd. in Fabre, *UQ* 366). Since the 1930s, when Communism first introduced Wright to internationalism, he had in fact consistently continued to push the limits imposed on the "Negros" born in the United States. He intensified this effort during his exile in Europe. In the mid-1950s, he was at pains to transform the peculiar double vision of the "Negroes" into a unique "gift," a privileged perspective of the future "African

Americans” *avant la lettre*, who would address not only the domestic problems of the U.S., but also global issues that concerned all in the world.<sup>148</sup> In order to claim this *gift*,

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<sup>148</sup> As a matter of fact, free African Americans in the North at least since the early nineteenth century had already sought to acquire similarly global perspectives. For the international interests of the early African American newspapers in the nineteenth century as well as the vibrant, internationally-minded (but too often forgotten) activities of African American book clubs at the turn of the twentieth century, see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002). As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, one should also mention the internationalism of W. E. B. Du Bois. In his address “To the Nations of the World” (1900), given during the first Pan-African Conference in London, he famously declared that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, the question as to how far differences of race, which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair, are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.” This passage was later revised and repeated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

From Hubert H. Harrison (1883-1927), Grace Campbell (1883-1943), Cyril V. Briggs (1888-1966), Otto Huiswood (1893-1961), Claude McKay (1889-1948), C. L. R. James (1901-1989), Claudia Jones (1915-64), to George Padmore (1903-59), many of the Caribbean-born African Americans had also struggled with the discourses of empire, nation, sovereignty and citizenship and imagined various forms of black internationalism, informed of the revolutionary ideas of socialism or Communism. As Fabre has noted, Padmore and James had a vital role in the formulation of Wright’s earlier Communist internationalism. For more on the Caribbean-born African American intellectuals’ construction of the “New World Negro,” see Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (2005). For the intimate (if constantly uneasy) relationship of black radicals and Communism, see Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (1998); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem*

Wright believed that the people of African descent in the United States would first have to address the enduring legacies of internalized racist thinking.

In “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People” collected in *White Man, Listen!* (1957), Wright critically analyzes specific forms of psychological subjugation. Among others is a psychologically restricted visual field of the oppressed, which he refers to as “frog perspectives”:

[Frog perspectives] is a phrase I’ve borrowed from Nietzsche to describe someone looking from below upward, a sense of someone who feels himself lower than others. The concept of distance involved here is not physical; it is psychological. It involves a situation in which, for moral or social reasons, a person or a group feels that there is another person or group above it. Yet, physically, they all live on the same general material plane. A certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring

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during the Depression (2004); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the War* (1999); James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (1999); Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst, eds., *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and the Twentieth Century Literature of the United States* (2003). Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) has also shed light on the vibrant transnational community of the black diaspora, both male and female, who gathered in Paris from Africa, the United States and the Caribbean, during the 1920s and 30s. For black internationalisms during the early Cold War era, see Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-57* (1997).

himself undergoes constant change. He loves the object because he would like to resemble it; he hates the object because his chances of resembling it are remote, slight. (656-57)<sup>149</sup>

Wright provides a number of examples to demonstrate how this historically and politically conditioned psychological reflex distorts the vision of the oppressed. For instance, whenever a “Negro” describes the state of black America, Wright critically observes, his/her words are always the same: “We are rising.” This desire for upward mobility, Wright points out, is always jealously “measured” against “his hostile white neighbor” (657).

At Bandung, Wright heard Carlos Romulo (1899-1985) of the Philippines speak from the similarly constricted perspective. In Wright’s view, the Filipino politician, like many other peoples of color, “measures the concept of manhood” (657) compulsively against the racialized and gendered norms of whiteness.<sup>150</sup> In order to remedy this

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<sup>149</sup> For an informative discussion of this concept in the context of Cultural Studies and postcolonial criticism, see Gilroy, “Cruciality and Frog’s Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain” (1988-89) and *The Black Atlantic*, 160-61.

<sup>150</sup> Some of the growing critical scholarship on the masculinized articulations of black counter-hegemonic discourses includes Hazel V. Carby, *Race Man* (1998); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (2005). For alternative histories of (female) black transnational subjectivities, see Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) and *Left of Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (2008); Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (2000); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*

constrained vision of the oppressed, Wright advocates the use of an alternative sensory organ: “Listen to the above words with a ‘third ear’ and you will catch echoes of psychological distance; every sentence implies a measuring of well-being, of power, of manners, of attitudes, of differences between Asia and Africa and the white West” (658).

“A third ear” introduced in this passage is another term Wright borrows from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil: A Prelude to the Philosophy of the Future* (1886). If the German philosopher used the term to deplore how his fellow citizens had become tone-deaf to literary artistry,<sup>151</sup> Wright appropriates it here as a heuristic and therapeutic means of diagnosing and rehabilitating the psychological/perceptual “difficulties and disabilities”<sup>152</sup> of the oppressed.

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(2003); Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport, “Helga Crane Copenhagen: Denmark, Colonialism, and Transnational Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*” (2008).

<sup>151</sup> “What a torture are books written in German to a reader who has a *THIRD* ear!” Nietzsche laments, “How indignantly he stands besides the slowly turning swamp of sounds without tune and rhythms without dance, which Germans call a ‘book’! And even the German who READS books! How lazily, how reluctantly, how badly reads! How many Germans know, and consider it obligatory to know, that there is ART in every good sentence—art which must be divined, if the sentence is to be understood! . . . After all, one just ‘has no ear for it’; and so the most marked contrasts of style are not heard, and the most delicate artistry is as it were SQUANDERED on the deaf” (90; emphasis original).

<sup>152</sup> “Why Richard Wright Came Back from France” in Kinnamon and Fabre 123.

As colonialism and racism placed an overwhelming symbolic and epistemological weight upon visual difference such as skin color, the “third ear” is evoked here to neutralize Eurocentric “visualism,” the privileged centrality of sight that inscribes and reinforces the hierarchically racialized difference based on color.<sup>153</sup> Like the decolonizing and de-Occidentalizing “third point of view” discussed earlier, Wright encourages the subjugated peoples of color to use the “third ear” as a heuristic and therapeutic means for epistemological liberation from the visual dominance of whiteness, with which the frog perspectives are closely associated.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> I have borrowed this term from Johannes Fabian. In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, he uses this term much more broadly than I do here to criticize how the (white) West, particularly the Eurocentric discipline of anthropology, has constructed its “Other” by producing a vision-centered body of knowledge (maps, charts, tables, ethnography based on observation rather than dialogue, etc.) about the non-West. Such visually produced body of knowledge denies the so-called “natives” what Fabian has called “coevalness,” a recognized presence within a shared temporality. See the section in his book entitled “Method and Vision” (106-09).

<sup>154</sup> Throughout his career, Wright consistently emphasized the oral/aural/musical aspects of black vernacular culture. Some of his books’ titles in fact foregrounded the voice(s) of African Americans: *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), *White Man, Listen!* (1957). I shall argue, however, that Wright’s haiku did not *privilege* the oral/aural/musical at the expense of other sensorial experiences, even if his haiku powerfully *dethrones* the hegemony of vision. In this context, Fabian has insightfully pointed out the pitfalls of naïvely believing in the un-mediatedness and (supposed) democratic nature of oral culture. For instance, there is nothing democratic or egalitarian about a preacher *speaking at/to* a congregation. Merely replacing visualism/the print culture (primarily if not exclusively associated with the modern West) with the marginalized oral traditions (of the non-West as well as the West) will



When Wright fell sick and became fascinated with haiku in the summer of 1959, it was not just his immediate conditions that encouraged him to write in this form (with novel-writing being too toilsome). Haiku appealed to him, I argue, because it provided an answer to his long-held wish: to heal the frog perspectives and other psycho-linguistic “difficulties and disabilities of being a Negro.”<sup>155</sup> The haiku 721 in the final manuscript is revealing in this context. The poem succinctly articulates the correlation between the impact of oppression and the appreciation of beauty in the narrator’s environment:

As my anger ebbs,  
The spring stars grow bright again,  
And the wind returns.

The record of Wright’s revision further accentuates the cathartic significance of haiku that he must have discovered during the process of rewriting. In an earlier version, the poem reads:

As my anger ebbs,  
The stars brighten in the sky  
And a spring wind comes.<sup>156</sup>

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not necessarily lead to more personal and equitable forms of communication. As Fabian has persuasively argued, it is debatable whether there is any guarantee that the oral/the aural/the musical are *inherently* more democratic medium than the visual.

<sup>155</sup> “Why Richard Wright Came Back from France” in Kinnamon and Fabre 123.

<sup>156</sup> 1103. Richard Wright Papers. Box 70 Folder 836.

The final version replaces “brighten” and “comes” with “grow bright again” and “returns,” adding a sense of recovery. Certainly “my anger” can be accrued to any number of reasons. But if one interprets the poem as self-reflexively referring to Wright’s changing attitudes toward his early memories in Mississippi, it clarifies what the haiku tradition had to offer the African American author. Strictly following the standard syllabic structure of 5-7-5, and diligently featuring a season reference, most of Wright’s haiku deal with vivid scenes of nature that bring the narrator’s senses into a sharp focus.

This poem is particularly important, for many critics have offered conflicting interpretations. Yoshinobu Hakutani claims that in this poem “Wright tries to suppress egoism and attain a state of nothingness. . . . Only when he reaches a state of nothingness is he able to perceive nature with enlightened senses” (10). This reading suggests more of evolution [toward some sort of epiphany] than a “return” to an original state, which, in my view, is the real emphasis. In contrast, Thomas L. Morgan has argued that this poem exemplifies what he calls “Wright’s inversion of the haiku moment” (107), by which he means that Wright rejects the Zen tenet of impersonality (at least in this particular instance) and privileges the human subjectivity above and beyond nature. It is the speaker, Morgan insists, who controls the perspective and is therefore in charge. For Morgan, this reflects an “empowerment” of the self rather than its erasure. Sachi Nakachi sides with Morgan and suggests that the poem embodies the “spirit” of the blues, its endurance to “overcome woe and melancholy” (145). As we shall see in a moment, Nakachi is right in linking the haiku poetics and the blues

aesthetics in terms of their common feature: a complex indeterminacy of opposite values, such as hope and despair.

As a matter of fact, Eugene E. Miller has observed that “[w]hile a unity with nature is a very important characteristic of Japanese haiku, . . . an attempt to establish a ‘return to nature’ motive [in Wright’s haiku] is ill-advised . . . . Wright’s primary interest in 1955 was the integration of the individual with society, not nature” (246). Ultimately, Miller nevertheless concludes that “[t]o know or become one with nature, or reality, in Wright’s view of the Afro-American way, was to become one with oneself (246).” In other words, immersion in nature prepares one to face and reconcile oneself with the society.

This empowering catharsis achieved through haiku is most eloquently suggested in Wright’s haiku on frogs. There are six of these in the final version of Wright’s manuscript. Along with moon, sun, snow, magnolias, scarecrows, and geese, frogs turn out to be one of the most frequently recurring subjects in his haiku. Morgan and Jianqing Zheng have turned to one of them and offered almost identical readings:

How lonely it is:

A rattling freight train has left

Fields of croaking frogs. (636)

The two critics read this poem as an expression of the speaker’s isolation and estrangement, and his implicit longing for connections with other human beings.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Morgan 117-18; Zheng, “Nature, the South, and Spain in *Haiku: This Other World*” 161-62.

Rather than viewing frogs as simply one of many props that stand for nature, I would like to highlight them as much more important, recurring presence in Wright's early and late writings. The literal adoption of a frog's perspective in his haiku is especially important, for it (if somewhat paradoxically) enables Wright to performatively transcend the previous definition of the "frog perspectives." In other words, frogs in his haiku are no longer negative symbols that characterized the skewed vision of the oppressed; instead, they embody freedom, agency, and most importantly, humor:

In the damp darkness,  
Croaking frogs are belching out  
The scent of magnolias. (227)

In this image, magnolia, historically a symbol of the (white) American South, is semantically neutralized and reconstructed. "In the damp darkness," the magnolias' visual features, not least their whiteness, are hidden, and the smell is instead foregrounded. The frogs' "croaking" also displaces the centrality of vision in the scene by focusing the reader's attention to the pastoral soundscape, presumably an aural memory in the American South from Wright's childhood, although, as Meta L. Schettler in "Healing and Loss: Richard Wright's Haiku and the Southern Landscape" has perceptively pointed out, the world of Wright's haiku is often unspecified and could be singing about any location—American South or French South (51).

In a 1946 interview, Wright expounds on the intertwined nature of racialized feelings—black inferiority complex and white superiority complex—for a French journalist and explains to him how subtly and pervasively American racialization takes

place:

But listen to this! Don't you see that opposite to this black inferiority complex there is a white superiority complex? The annihilation of one complex depends on the disappearance of the other. Unfortunately—and here we touch on the notion of powerlessness—the superiority complex is, in its essence, specifically American. It is a mental formation that doesn't need to be taught. It is atavistic, geographical, spontaneous. It's a reaction. It's visual. It's latent. It's olfactory, auditory. It is monumental. This is prejudice!<sup>158</sup>

By examining two of Wright's haiku on magnolia (though not including the one above),<sup>159</sup> Schettler has noted that "Wright's interest in landscape here reclaims Southern earth as his earth. He claims iconic symbols of the South [magnolia and cotton] as his own" (46). Since the initial loss was total, this reclamation has also to take place on the visual, latent, olfactory, auditory, that is, on every perceptual level.

While in the United States, Wright rarely had a chance to show his appreciation for nature. He explains why: "when an American Negro harbors a yearning for a landscape, it wisely behooves him to choose with care, for, for him, most American landscapes have been robbed of the innocence of their sylvan beauty by the fact that almost every lynching in American history has taken place in such an arcadian setting" ("I Choose Exile" 3).

Breaking such psychological chain of racism, deeply internalized in Wright's childhood, was going to be a herculean task. As Wright was the first to admit, he knew

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<sup>158</sup> "Richard Wright Tells Us: The White Problem in the United States." Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, eds. *Conversations with Richard Wright* 100.

<sup>159</sup> "Lonelier than dew/ On shriveled magnolias/ Burnt black by the sun"; "From a cotton field/ To magnolia trees,/ A bridge of swallows."

full well that the South would somehow haunt him, no matter how far he might run away: “Yet, deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South . . .” (*Black Boy* 414). Since he knew that physically leaving the South would not automatically lead to psychological liberation, Wright made a conscious effort at reconciling himself with his childhood memories of pain and hate:

I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it, might come to know what its rigors had done to me, to its children. I fled so that the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain—years later and far away—of what living in the South had meant. . . . I was taking part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom. . . . And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of southern night. (414-15)<sup>160</sup>

Wright’s horticultural language here contrasts sharply with the conventional image of the author as a militant writer, enamored or obsessed with violence. More importantly, rather than cutting his ambivalent roots in the American South when he left Mississippi and becoming an embittered *déraciné*, Wright, I argue, indeed successfully “transplanted” the seeds of his painful memories in “alien soil,” exposed them to “the

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<sup>160</sup> I thank Laura Murphy for directing me to this passage.

warmth of other suns” and finally transformed them by letting them sprout and bloom as haiku, which Gwendolyn Brooks once beautifully described as “a strong clutch of flowers.”<sup>161</sup>

Evie Shockley in “Black Nature/ Human Nature” (2011) has recently noted the various historical impediments that have often prevented African American poets from singing about nature. In fact, Shockley has gone so far as to claim that “‘black nature poetry’ became an oxymoron” during the Black Arts Movement of the mid-1960 and the late 70s. This was because the ideal image for both black revolutionaries and cultural nationalists alike during this period was informed by the Northern, urban “New Negroes” of the earlier Renaissance in the 1920s. For instance, Lucille Clifton (1936-2000) echoed Wright’s sentiment in “surely i am able to write poems,” posthumously published in *Mercy* (2004):

surely i am able to write poems celebrating grass and how the blue  
in the sky can flow green or red  
and the waters lean against the  
chesapeake shore like a familiar  
poems about nature and landscape  
surely     but whenever i begin  
“the trees wave their knotted branches  
and. . .”     why  
is there under that poem always

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<sup>161</sup> This phrase is used as a blurb on the cover of *Haiku: This Other Word*.

an other poem?<sup>162</sup>

Although Wright had previously found it difficult and irresponsible to write about nature without referring to racism, the formal requirements of haiku, its brevity and the necessary inclusion of a season word, must have encouraged him to turn to nature, without adding an explicit social commentary. His increasing sense of psychological freedom in France, culminated in his vacations taken at a farmhouse in Normandy,<sup>163</sup> must also have made it easier for him to revisit his childhood memories in rural Mississippi:

In a red sunset

A frog commands the night wind

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<sup>162</sup> Of course, African American poets have written poems about nature for a long time. The recent publication of *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), edited by Camille T. Dungy, incontrovertibly attests to the existence of a rich tradition of black nature poetry in the United States. It is nevertheless true that nature poetry has been marginalized in or excluded from many anthologies of black literature. This is why *Black Nature* is groundbreaking. The reader will find four of Wright's haiku as well as a passage from *Twelve Million Black Voices* in the excellent volume.

<sup>163</sup> In January of 1955, Wright had finally realized his dream of buying a farmhouse at Ailly, where he enjoyed writing quietly and tending to his garden; in the spring of 1959, however, he had to sell the property in order to buy a new house in London. Around that time, the Wrights decided to leave France for England, but the British government refused to issue Richard a visa. As a result, his wife and children ended up moving there by themselves to wait for him. In any event, the time spent on the farm must have made him sensitive to nature again. (Fabre, *UQ* 412, 492; Rowley 458-59, 484).



To roll out a moon.<sup>164</sup>

This colorfully animated image of the frog is obviously freed from the negative meanings associated with the “frog perspectives.” As the frog looks up at the moon in the sky, there is no bitterness, no jealousy!

Another frog haiku explores a complicated relationship between sight and hearing by creating a perceptual illusion.

The fog’s density

Deepens the croak of the frogs

On an April dawn. (318)

What is the relationship between vision and hearing in this poem? Depending on one’s perspective, the two senses can be seen as working against each other (in opposition) or together (supplementarily): if the “fog’s density” is interpreted metaphorically as *the absence of visibility*, the negative correlation (contrast) between the two senses is foregrounded. *The less one can see, the more one can hear*. Instead, if the “fog’s density” is seen literally as *a visible presence*, the positive correlation (enhancement) between the two senses is implied. *The more one can see (the fog), the more one can hear (the frog)*. Magnifying such a subtle but significant difference (fog/frog and

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<sup>164</sup> Richard A. Iadonisi in “I Am Nobody: The Haiku of Richard Wright” suggests that many of Wright’s haiku can be read either as implying or contesting a harmonious relationship between the poet and nature (77-78). Iadonisi also convincingly argues that it is equally possible to see the poet as having absolute control over nature and as only *claiming* to have such power. In this poem, there is in fact no guarantee that the wind will actually listen to the command of the frog, the poet’s surrogate.

visibility/invisibility), the haiku encourages the reader to explore the fascinating inner workings of human perception, unhampered, it is important to note, by the constrictions imposed by oppression.

### III. Three Hundred Ways of Perceiving the Frog: R. H. Blyth's Transcultural Account of Haiku and Wright's Poetics of Humor

These frog haiku by Wright immediately remind the reader of a well-known poem by Bashō, one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, practitioners of the form:

The old pond;  
A frog jumps in,---  
The sound of the water.

Was Wright aware of this intertextual connection? Or is the frequent appearance of frogs in classical haiku and the African American's poems just a mere coincidence? In this section, I will further explore the significance of the frog while revisiting the work of R. H. Blyth, a British expatriate in Japan, whose comparative literary analysis of the Japanese poetic tradition played a vital mediating role in Wright's encounter with the form.

Before beginning his poetic experiment in the summer of 1959, Wright had stumbled upon haiku through a chance encounter with Sinclair Beiles (1930-2000), a white South African poet who was staying at the time in Wright's neighborhood at the legendary Beat Hotel in the Latin Quarter. Wright borrowed from this beat poet the

entire four volumes of Blyth's *Haiku* (1947-1952), a comprehensive account of the history and techniques of the poetic tradition. He perused these volumes again and again. Wright's fascination with Blyth's work is attested by the fact that he even asked his wife, who had moved to London, to purchase copies of *Haiku* and send them to him in Paris.<sup>165</sup>

Yoshinobu Hakutani and Eugene E. Miler, among others, have already pointed out the role played by Blyth's *Haiku* in Wright's having a sudden interest in the Japanese tradition. For anyone who has read *Haiku*, it is clear that Blyth's thoughts on Zen, especially his remarks on the significance of achieving a state of impersonality, left a tangible mark on many of Wright's haiku.<sup>166</sup> As Sanehide Kodama and Miller have

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<sup>165</sup> Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 14.

<sup>166</sup> See, for instance, Hakutani "Richard Wright's Haiku, Zen, and the African 'Primal Outlook upon Life'" and Toru Kiuchi, "Zen Buddhism in Richard Wright's Haiku." It should be noted that Hakutani tends to read Wright's poems out of their contexts by putting much emphasis on what he views as the timeless "truths" of Zen (that the African American author supposedly embraced, though Wright did not explicitly or implicitly mention such a conversion), so much so that his account of Wright's poems are often read as faithful (but more or less doctrinaire) expressions of Zen. For instance, the reader of *Black Power* will notice that Wright's attitude towards the so-called "primal outlook" of Africans, which Hakutani describes as Zen-like, was highly ambivalent. Wright even argued that such an outlook (supposedly retained by African Americans after the Middle Passage) was a result of racism and that it should be eventually overcome when racism is ended. Given the fact that Wright's main (perhaps only) source of information about haiku was Blyth's *Haiku*, one would do well to take heed of Blyth's (often overlooked) remark on the relationship between haiku and Zen at the very beginning of the book: "Yet we may say outright that haiku is haiku, with it's

shown,<sup>167</sup> however, Blyth's influence on the African American writer went beyond the former's emphasis on impersonality. Building on the previous scholarship, I will argue that Blyth's (sometimes idiosyncratic) highlighting of humor, indeterminacy, and the subtle poetic significance to be achieved in the three short unrhymed lines had a decisive impact on the form and the content of Wright's haiku. Although Wright had already been familiar with the work of haiku-inspired imagist poets such as Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in the 1930s,<sup>168</sup> his haiku poetry was much more faithful to the conventions learned from Blyth than the earlier modernists' loose, but creative adaptations were.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, as I shall discuss at length in the following chapters,

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own unwritten laws and standards, its aims and achievements. It has little or nothing to do with poetry, so-called, or Zen, or anything else. It belongs to a tradition of looking at things, a way of living, a certain tenderness and smallness of mind that avoids the magnificent, the infinite and the eternal. Its faults are a tendency towards weakness and sentiment, but it avoids lyricism and mind-coloring both instinctively and consciously. *If we say then that haiku is a form of Zen, we must not assert that haiku belongs to Zen, but that Zen belongs to haiku. In other words, our notions of Zen must be changed to fit haiku, not vice-versa*" (6; emphasis mine); similarly, "I understand Zen and poetry to be practically synonyms, but as I said before, if there is ever imagined to be any conflict between Zen and the poetry of haiku, the Zen goes overboard; poetry is the ultimate standard" (7).

<sup>167</sup> Kodama, "Japanese Influence on Richard Wright in His Last Years: English Haiku as a New Genre" (1985); Miller, *Voices of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (1990).

<sup>168</sup> Fabre, Richard Wright: Books and Writers 46.

<sup>169</sup> For a provocative but compelling account of Imagism's transcultural adaptations of the Eastern poetics and art, see Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995); for broader connections between

though Wright's haiku anticipated those of other African American poets such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, Dudley Randall and James A. Emanuel, his haiku was quite different from those of most Black Arts poets in the 60s and 70s. The younger African American poets have more affinity to the earlier Anglo-American imagists and contemporary Japanese haiku innovators since the 1930s,<sup>170</sup> in the sense that they parted with the strict formal rules of the tradition

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Anglo-American modernism and the Orient, see Qian, ed., *Modernism and the Orient* (2012); Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2002); Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (1996). For the relationship of Pound and haiku in particular, see also Hakutani, "Richard Wright's Haiku, Zen, and the African 'Primal Outlook upon Life,'" 12-13, and "Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi, Imagism." For an illuminating rehistoricization of Pound, Amy Lowell, and Richard Aldington's encounter with haiku, see Rupert Arrowsmith, "The Transcultural Roots of Modernism: Imagist Poetry, Japanese Visual Culture, and the Western Museum System" (2011). For a helpful survey of recent scholarships that move beyond the dichotomy of the East and the West, R. John Williams, "Modernist Scandals: Ezra Pound's Translations of 'the' Chinese Poem" (2009).

<sup>170</sup> See Kazuo Tajima, *Shinko haijin no gunzo: "Kyodai haiku" no hikari to kage* [New Haiku Poets: The Rise and Demise of "Kyoto University Haiku Group"] (2005). In the early 1930s, some young Japanese haiku poets, associated with little magazines such as *Kyodai Haiku* and *Haiku Kenkyu*, started to break away from the 5-7-5 form and to stop using a season word. Some of them wrote explicitly social haiku, referring to Marx, revolution, and fascism. That haiku is *not* inherently asocial or ahistorical is also attested by modern haiku poets who wrote *for* as well as *against* the War during the 1930s and 40s. In fact, the members of *Kyodai Haiku* group were all arrested by the military police for their anti-war or allegedly subversive haiku. Among numerous critics who have analyzed Wright's, Karen Jackson Ford ("The Fight and the Fiddle in

(including the use of a season word as well as the 5-7-5 syllabic structure) when writing their haiku. That is not to say that Wright did not make any adaptations. With Blyth as a guide, Wright first immersed himself in the pre-modern world of classical haiku,<sup>171</sup> and (like Lewis Alexander) gradually learned to push the boundaries of the Japanese tradition to recollect and reassemble his own experiences as an African American within the 5-7-5 syllabic structure. Wright may have encountered the difficulties of identifying with Asians (and Africans) in person time and again, as Harilaos Stecopoulos has recently reminded us,<sup>172</sup> but I argue that the African American author

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Twentieth-Century African American Poetry”) is the only one who has made this comparison between Wright and modern Japanese poets. Although African American poets were more familiar with classic haiku than with the contemporary ones, we should explore how contemporary haiku poems in different parts of the world are doing to the tradition both in terms of the form and the theme.

<sup>171</sup> To be sure, Blyth’s *Haiku* features Shiki Masaoka (1867-1902), a significant modern renovator of the tradition. Nevertheless, *Haiku*’s main focus is on the classical haiku of the premoderns.

<sup>172</sup> In his perceptive reading of *The Iron Curtain*, Harilaos Stecopoulos teases out the ambivalence of Wright’s dream for transracial and transnational alliance and unity as the African American writer encountered many internal differences that he thought was impossible to overcome: “Wright found it difficult to link the black southerner (and black American) to Asian peoples, however, much his own interest in the Indonesians might suggest such a connection. For him, the plight of the segregated black southerner was at once similar to and very different from that of the postcolonial Asian—racial injury might bind them, but modernity separated them. And yet even as Wright knew that questions of development rendered impossible any easy connection between black and Asian, he still promoted a black internationalist perspective that affirmed the value of some aspects of the modern for all people of color, in the global periphery and the

discovered in haiku a common, relatable structure of thought and feeling that cut across time, language, race and culture.

Wright did not probably know much about Blyth's life, but he would certainly have recognized, in this white British expatriate in Japan, a fellow outsider, a cosmopolitan who at once symbolized and spurred the de-Occidentalization of the world.<sup>173</sup> Blyth was born in England in 1898, to a working-class family.<sup>174</sup> During WWI, Blyth became a conscientious objector. As a result, he was imprisoned for nearly two years until the war's end. In fact, he was so thoroughly opposed to the idea of taking a life that he

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U.S. metropole. That modernity often spoke in colonial accents did not render it any less important" ("Mississippi on the Pacific: William Faulkner and Richard Wright" 132). For similar issues Wright had with the conditions of Africans, see Anthony Kwame Appiah, "A Long Way From Home: Richard Wright in the Gold Coast" (1987); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Third World of Theory: Enlightenment's Esau" (2008).

<sup>173</sup> Sachi Nakachi has claimed that Blyth's approach to Japan and Japanese literature resembled an old-school Orientalist without citing textual or biographical evidence to support her assertion: "Blyth's attitude was more like that of Orientalists in the nineteenth century who longed to keep Japan unmodernized for their own nostalgia of good old days" (138). As I shall demonstrate in the following pages, this is a gross mischaracterization of Blyth's life and work.

<sup>174</sup> Blyth's father was a railroad worker. For Blyth's biographical information in English, I have consulted Adrian Pennington, "R. H. Blyth" (1994); Robert Aitken, "Remembering Blyth Sensei" (1996). In Japanese, see Ikuyo Yoshimura, *R. H. Buraizu no Shōgai: Zen to Haiku wo Aishite* [The Life of R. H. Blyth: A Man in Love with Zen and Haiku] (1996); Kuniyoshi Ueda, *Buraizu-Sensei, Arigato* [Thank you, Professor Blyth] (2010). Yoshimura's critical biography is the most comprehensive source of Blyth's life and work at present.

became a committed vegetarian from this period.<sup>175</sup> After being released, he attended the University of London to major in English literature. In 1925, Blyth, fresh out of college, took a job as an assistant professor of English at Keijyo University in Seoul under the imperial Japanese rule. In addition to Chinese and Japanese, he also began to study Zen around this time. Blyth married a Japanese woman in Korea, and the couple moved to the mainland Japan in 1940. When the Pacific War broke out in the following year, he was separated from his wife and again interned, this time, as an “enemy alien.” In prison, he wrote *Zen in English and Oriental Classics* (1942), a playful (almost puckish) exploration of elements and moments that might be thought of as “Zen-like” in the Western canon (at least, what we would now call a “pop” understanding of it) and managed to have the book released by a Japanese publisher. This was a remarkable feat in the wartime era when English was virulently censored in the nation. It was in these prison years too that Blyth began to work on a manuscript that was to become *Haiku*.

One finds little biographical information about the author in these volumes, except for a brief passage in the “Preface,” in which Blyth mentions air-raids that burned most of the books he had consulted while working on the ambitious project (xiv). After the war, Blyth became a private tutor of the Crown Prince Akihito (the present Emperor). One wonders how Wright would have reacted if he had learned that it was no other than Blyth who wrote the earlier drafts of the emperor Hirohito’s speech in which the “living God” publicly renounced his divinity in 1946.<sup>176</sup> Apart from working for the Imperial

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<sup>175</sup> Yoshimura 49-56.

<sup>176</sup> In the 1941 “Introduction” to *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Wright expressed his



family, Blyth became a co-editor of D. T. Suzuki's short-lived magazine, *Cultural East* (1956-57).<sup>177</sup> Moreover, he befriended influential cultural workers such as Sōetsu Yanagi, the founder of *mingei* (folk craft) movement, and Bernard Leach, the "Father of British studio pottery."<sup>178</sup> As an educator, Blyth taught English literature to thousands of students at universities in Tokyo till he passed away in 1964.<sup>179</sup>

Blyth's *Haiku* has been duly recognized as one of the most comprehensive and accessible textbooks among English readers and writers interested in the poetic tradition.<sup>180</sup> In addition to Beat writers and poets (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary

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unequivocal opposition to fascism: "In the present world struggle, the American Negro is allied with the anti-Axis powers. To put it bluntly, while there are many things wrong with American's democracy as far as the Negro is concerned, his wrongs *will not* and *cannot* be righted by Hitler, Mussolini or Hirohito" (qtd. Fabre, *UQ* 227).

<sup>177</sup> See Dower 314-45; Yoshimura 130-35; 159-78. Although Wright was most likely not aware of Blyth's role in the secularization of Japan, he would have no doubt applauded his efforts, since Wright was once a vocal critic of Japanese fascism during WWII.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 136-44.

<sup>179</sup> Needless to say, Blyth had his own share of flaws. Robert Aiken, who admired Blyth's work and knew the man in person since their first encounter in an internment camp in Kobe, recalls some of them, which includes his male chauvinism and "un-Zen-like" hot-temperedness. See "Remembering Blyth Sensei" 26.

<sup>180</sup> Despite his passion for haiku, he left only two of his own: "*Ha no urani/ Aoi yume miru katatsumuri* (c.1938). In his own translation, the haiku reads, "A snail/ Dreams a blue dream/ On the back of a leaf." Towards the end of his life, Blyth produced another poem: "*Sazanka ni/ Kokoro nokoshite/ Tabidachinu*" (qtd. in Patricia Hackett, "Visiting R. H. Blyth's Home"). He left no English translation for this piece. In my rough translation, it reads as follows: "I leave my heart / to the sasanqua flower [camellia]/ on

Snyder, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka), prominent American writers and artists such as J.D. Salinger<sup>181</sup> and John Cage<sup>182</sup> learned about the Japanese poetic tradition through his books. Relatively unknown among the academic circle is the value of Blyth's writing as an outstanding piece of scholarship on comparative literature. His book adopts a fundamentally (though more intuitive than systematic) multidisciplinary approach. The first volume under the subtitle of "Eastern Culture" takes account of the history of the form and examines religious influences of "pre-buddhistic Indian thought" (4) recorded in *The Upanishads*, Zen, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism. The volume also introduces to the reader haiku's various techniques while comparing its characteristics to other poetic traditions, both of the East and the West. Particularly significant to the present discussion is Blyth's sensitivity, underlined by deep and wide knowledge of various literary traditions, which enables him to see transculturally relatable commonalities in the particular poetics of haiku. Blyth compares and contrasts such masters as Bashō and Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) to Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Whitman, quoting at length these Western authors' texts to demonstrate certain common values and sensibilities that, he believes, cut across time, place,

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the day of this journey". Yoshimura notes that there are five different versions of the former (78-81).

<sup>181</sup> Blyth is mentioned in *Raise High the Room Beam, Carpenters* (1955) and *Seymour: Introduction* (1959).

<sup>182</sup> Cage often referred to Blyth in his writings as well as in his public lectures; he would also lend his private copies of Blyth's work to his friends and acquaintances. For more on this connection, see David Nicholls, *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* 52-53.

language and culture.<sup>183</sup> Well-acquainted with European languages other than English, the polyglot also accounts for the poetic sensibilities of Bashō and other haiku poets in comparison to those of Dante, Goethe, Cervantes, as well as Homer and Virgil, sometimes citing the latter in their original languages.<sup>184</sup>

A music lover who regularly played instruments himself with his family and friends,<sup>185</sup> Blyth also emphasizes haiku's *musicality* to explain its poetics. Notably, he often compares haiku to the music of J. S. Bach.<sup>186</sup> As Miller has pointed out, Blyth also identifies haiku, particularly after Bashō sublimated "its low state of punning and joking" into an elevated form of the folk expression (Blyth 121).<sup>187</sup> Blurring the highbrow and the lowbrow, Blyth describes haiku as constituting "literature, and yet

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<sup>183</sup> See 174-75 and 297-306.

<sup>184</sup> See 174, 180-81, and 980-81.

<sup>185</sup> According to Aitken, Blyth played "virtually all the Western orchestral instruments," but his favorite was the oboe ("Remembering Blyth Sensei" 26).

<sup>186</sup> Yoshimura 70-73. In the "Preface" to *Haiku*, for instance, Blyth writes, "Haiku does not, like waka, aim at beauty. Like the music of Bach, it aims at significance, and some special kind of beauty is found hovering near" (x).

<sup>187</sup> As we shall discuss more in detail in the next chapter, pun is seldom used in haiku. Significantly, however, Bashō did not hesitate to use the technique. Blyth explains the function of pun in haiku as follows, "Puns are supposed to be a form of humor, but in one sense they have not the surface-shattering effect of a good joke. On the other hand, they loosen the fixed connotations of words and soften their hard lines, they telescope ideas that are in thought irreconcilable, and induce a willing suspicion of disbelief, by what is often a mechanical and verbal trick, but which is sometimes a kind of linguistic gaiety of mind" (313). Blyth seems to believe that puns are permitted when done with sophistication.

something beyond and above literature,” which was as serious as it was “popular, democratic, plebian” (121). Miller is right in identifying the plebian and musical aspects of haiku as primary attractions of haiku for Wright.<sup>188</sup> According to Blyth, Bashō made a commitment to create a distinct form of haiku out of the folk, the everyday, and the vernacular. When he adapted *kanshi* [Chinese poetry], particularly of the Tang Dynasty (618-c.906) as well as earlier Japanese poetic traditions collectively known as *waka* [Japanese poetry], Bashō creatively appropriated their forms and themes not only to capture but also to transform the everyday language of the Japanese folk: “[Haiku] has for its object the setting to rights common parlance and ordinary languages” (qtd. in Blyth 119). Blyth interprets this statement as indicating Bashō’s desire to have “our daily prose turned into poetry, the realization that the commonest events and actions of life may be done significantly, the deeper use of all language, written and spoken” (119). In this context, Miller has perceptively drawn our attention to one haiku-like poem Blyth singles out in the American literary tradition:

The railroad bridge  
Is a sad song  
In de air. (306)<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> See 242-44.

<sup>189</sup> As Werner Sollors has perceptively pointed out in a personal e-mail to me, Blyth slightly changes the poem. This is probably just an error Blyth made in copying the poem—perhaps his copy of Hughes’s poem was also burned in a bombing during the war. In any case, in the original, the poem begins, “De railroad bridge’s/ A sad song in de air” (“Homesick Blues” 72).

In the appendix, Blyth identifies this dialect poem as “Homesick Blues” by Langston Hughes, Wright’s friend and pioneering practitioner of the blues poetry (416). I shall later examine the important connections between Wright’s haiku and blues later in detail; suffice it note here that the affinity Blyth saw between the musicality of haiku poetics and Hughes’s blues poetry (at least one instance of it) could not have been lost on him. Even though Wright himself did not use African American dialect in any of his haiku, he must have implicitly grasped that the two traditions had much in common.

In section V of the first volume entitled “the technique of haiku,” Blyth discusses the significance of “brevity” in haiku. The mere shortness of a poem does not lead to “true” brevity, he pointed out, since it is a matter of quality rather than quantity: “[m]any a haiku is a failure because, in spite of its simplicity and brevity, [the world of weak haiku] is reality still clobbered up with unessential material, reality minus art” (357). By contrast, a great haiku produces complex and compact poetic rhythm, not the “false” brevity or the artless humdrum of the prosaic. Blyth suggests that “the [ideal haiku] poet should see the universe under the aspect of harmony, as rhythm and symphony; in the deepest sense of the word, *musically*” (357; italics original). This *visual and aural musicality* of haiku, rendered in Blyth’s synesthetic expression, is further elaborated in cosmic terms: “The relation of the elements of the haiku is that of the phrases of a melody, and this melody is in counterpoint to, is a variation of the spheres” (357).

Although classic Japanese haiku seldom use alliteration and assonance, some of Wright’s haiku adroitly use these techniques to create a special melody. In the following

poem, listen to the repetitions of “s,” “o” and “p”:

Steep with deep sweetness,

O You White Magnolias,

This still torpid night! (9)

If the poem above musically reinforces the sweetness of the subject with a mellow rhythm, the next one is about music both thematically and formally:

I would like a bell

Tolling in this soft twillight

Over willow trees. (13)

Assonances of w’s, l’s, and o’s themselves embody the speaker’s deep desire to hear the music.

Blyth’s account of “humor and puns” is even more vital to Wright’s haiku. Of all the elements of haiku, Blyth’s choice to discuss these subjects at the beginning of the section, “the technique of haiku,” reflects the special significance he gave them.<sup>190</sup> Interestingly, Blyth in fact claims that the humor of haiku is much more than a mere technique. Humor, he declares, “is hardly part of their technique, for it is not something detachable, but belongs to the spirit rather than to the form. It is some indispensable element without which haiku can hardly exist, some poise of the mind, some balance of conflicting elements from which arises that pleasure whose peculiar quality causes us to

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<sup>190</sup> Blyth discusses nine technical characteristics in the order of “humor and puns,” “brevity,” “the Japanese language,” “onomatopoeia,” “the form of haiku,” “*kireji* [cutting word],” “haiku sequences,” “the seasons” and “translation.”

give it the name of humor” (353). In Blyth’s estimate, even Bashō, the fundamentally “serious” and “humorless” poet whose work was characterized by “depth and moral strength,” was redeemed by the haiku’s “inheritance of inalienable humor,” which prevented him from “[falling] into philosophizing or didacticism” (353). No less prone to philosophizing and didacticism than Bashō, Wright also benefited from this “inheritance.” The haiku form enabled him to give free rein to his sense of humor, which is rarely seen in his earlier novels and non-fictions. In 510, for instance, we see how he comically describes the arrival of spring:

With its first blossom,  
The little apple tree brags:  
“Look, look! Me too!”

In 512, we also see a jocular parody of the stern authoritarianism of the Communist parlance:

If pumpkins could talk,  
I am sure that they would be  
Reactionary!

To defamiliarize the familiar, Wright often uses personification to make inanimate objects come comically alive:

Would not green peppers  
Make strangely lovely insects  
If they sprouted legs? (527)

A snail’s movement is too slow and hesitant to know what it really wants to do:

Make up your mind, Snail!

You are half inside your house,

And halfway out! (7)

Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Tener have observed that some of Wright's humorous haiku might be better identified as *senryu*, a "mock haiku," a satirical subgenre pioneered by Karai Senryu (1718-1790). According to these critics, *senryu* is characterized by "humor, moralizing nuances, and a philosophical tone, expressing 'the incongruity of things' more than their oneness, more often with distortions and failures, not just the harmonious beauty of nature" (255). As a matter of fact, Blyth understood these aspects of the subgenre, sans moralism, as the quintessential elements of haiku as a whole. Confirming Wright's debt to Blyth, many of his haiku seek to realize a "balance of conflicting elements":

Glittering with frost,

A dead frog squats livingly

In the garden path. (815)

Such boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, the tragic and the comic, or death and life, are easily transcended.

A balance of conflicting elements is sought in much more serious poems as well. Cautioning the reader not to overemphasize the distinction between *waka* and haiku too much, Blyth nevertheless points out that *waka* generally "aim at beauty, a somewhat superficial beauty sometimes, that excludes all ugly things." By contrast, "[t]he aim of haiku is not beauty; it is something much deeper and wider. It is *significance*, a poetical



significance, ‘a shock of mild surprise,’ that the poet receives when the haiku is born, and the reader when it is reborn in his mind” (113-14; italics original). It is these “intensely interesting states of mind that have no relation to beauty at all” (114) that haiku endeavors to represent. In other words, haiku seeks to “seize a moment of inexplicable depth” that can only be adequately rendered in the rhetorical device of “*kireji*,” an ineffable sigh of “ah!” and “oh!”<sup>191</sup> According to Blyth, this is why haiku, in contrast to many *waka*, never has a title to specify its content, since its “real subject is unmentionable” (117). Again emphasizing its musicality, Blyth proposes to *hear* haiku as intense “[s]ongs without words,” whose “melody and rhythm remove the barriers of custom and prejudice between ourselves and the object” (117). Such a liberating poetics (aspired if not always realized by haiku) must have had an undeniable appeal for Wright, who had lived in the virtual prison house of race and racism, where racialized customs and prejudices inexorably dictated his relationship to the world around him.

That Wright learned a great deal about the Japanese tradition from Blyth can also be demonstrated by looking at the recurring theme of frogs. *Haiku* is divided into sections that deal with different seasons and themes one at a time. In the section entitled “Birds and Beasts,” Blyth spends as many as eleven pages on frogs, a season word of spring

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<sup>191</sup> “*Kireji*” is a technique using exclamatory punctuations such as “*ㄅ* [Ah! or Oh!]” and “*ㄅ ㄅ* [a word expressing the passage of time with often ineffable emotions such as nostalgia].” As Blyth admits, this technique is hard to translate. Here, again, he explains it in musical terms: “*Kireji* are a kind of poetical punctuation, or the marks piano, forte, crescendo, sordino, in music, by which the composer of haiku expresses, or hints at, or emphasizes his mood and soul-state” (377-79).

(530-40). If one includes different types of frogs such as *ama gaeru* 雨蛙, *ao gameru* 青蛙, *gama* ガマ, which are associated with summer, Blyth cites 39 frog haiku in total. Although the work of Bashō, Moritake (1472-1549), Buson (1715-1783) must have had a great influence on Wright,<sup>192</sup> it seems Issa had the greatest appeal to Wright's sensibility. Out of the thirty-nine frog haiku Blyth discusses, ten are by Issa, the poet known for his comic poems. Some of his humorous haiku in translation read:

The frog  
Looks at me,---  
But with a sour face!

The frog  
Is having a staring-match  
With me.

No doubt the boss,  
That frog croaking there,  
In the seat of honor.

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<sup>192</sup> Hakutani, "Wright's Haiku, Zen, and the African 'Primal Outlook.'" As is well known, Moritake's "Fallen petals/ Seemed to return to the branch,--/ A butterfly!" had a direct impact on Ezra Pound, who was inspired by the vivid image to write his famous imagist poem: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough." As Hakutani notes, Wright produced a similar imagery: "Off the cherry tree,/ One twig and its red blossom/ flies into the sun" (626).

Calm and serene,  
The frog gazes  
At the mountains. (533)

Blyth identifies the last of these haiku as a parody of the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming [in Japanese, To Enmei] (365-427). Excavating an intertextual connection between Tao's "Plucking chrysanthemums along the east fence;/ Gazing in calm rapture at the Southern Hills" (qtd. 535) and Issa's frog haiku above, Blyth underscores the latter's sense of humor that refuses to take life "too seriously." Blyth argued that too much seriousness was "the cause (and effect) of egotism and self-pity" (535), which Issa subtly mocked through his haiku.

Blyth cites another frog poem by Issa as a celebration of the weak over the powerful:

Thin frog,  
Don't be beat,  
Issa is here! (qtd. 535)

Interestingly, Blyth, along with Issa, defends the underdog (under-frog?) against a Nietzschean moral philosophy of the superman beyond good and evil: "We have an instinct against the survival of the fittest that Nietzsche could not shout away" (535). If the serial killer Cross in Wright's *The Outsider* was conceived as a lonely Nietzschean anti-hero, who believed himself to be beyond not only the racialized sense of inferiority [the frog perspectives] but also the social norms of good and evil, Wright must have smiled at this comically sympathetic image. Issa builds what one might describe as a

post-human/trans-species solidarity with the frog by bringing his perspective to the same level as that of the animal, offering a radically different meaning of the frog perspectives from that of the German philosopher.

In addition to the ten frog poems quoted in full, Blyth notes that Issa left about three hundred more haiku on the subject (533). Given the centrality of humor in Wright's haiku and his sustained interest in frogs,<sup>193</sup> Issa's influence on the African American author seems hard to deny, even without his explicit acknowledgement of the literary influence.<sup>194</sup>

In any case, it is clear that Wright discovered in haiku a formal device to use his sense of humor in writing<sup>195</sup> as well as to revivify his formerly "disabled" sensitivity to

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<sup>193</sup> Wright even mentions frogs in his travelogue to the Gold Coast: "Night fell and suddenly out of the blue velvet dark came the sound of African crickets that was like an air-raid siren. Frog belches exploded. A soft, feathery thud, like that of a bird, struck the window screen. Reluctantly, I climbed into bed. . . ." (*Black Power* 72).

<sup>194</sup> Richard A. Iadonisi has analyzed some of Wright's other haiku and also recognized Issa's influence on Wright (79-81).

<sup>195</sup> Recollections of his family and friends as well as numerous photographs of the author confirm that Wright was not always so grim and serious as some critics have painted him. In fact, he was known for his beaming smiles and resounding guffaws in personal life (Webb 196, 250). As Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre in their Introduction to *Conversations with Richard Wright* note, William Gardner Smith remembered Wright as having "a broad sense of humor, and laughs raucously, soft brown eyes twinkling behind rimless glasses"; one American interviewer in the mid-1940s described him as "affable, poised, quick to smile, almost gay"; another thought of him as "a lively person with a jolly smile under his big, round glasses"; A French interviewer recalled the unexpected way in which her meeting with the author

nature and sympathy for various animals near the end of his life. Wright's interest in various ways of perceiving—looking at, hearing, and even smelling—frogs thus indicates how familiar Wright had become with the classical haiku tradition.

Because the ideologies of racism and primitivism historically dehumanized African Americans, critics have often (all too understandably) refrained from emphasizing African Americans' affinity with nature. But this defensive stance has also had an unexpected, negative side effect as well. As Evie Shockley has noted, in the recent rise of environmental literature/ecocriticism/ecopoetics, critics in the field have tended to

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ended in 1946, "At this point, Richard Wright smiled a smile that contradicted the pessimism of his pronouncements. Large, strong, his face expressed poise, health. And when he laughed, one could not imagine that anyone who laughed in that way was not, at bottom, a firm optimism" (qtd. in xii-xiii). As Kinnamon and Fabre cautiously suggest, the transcriptions of his interviews give an impression that Wright often laughed to defuse tension or to hide his surprise at the interviewer's naïveté about race and racism in the United States. Nevertheless, it's clear that he was by no means a grim Bigger Thomas which too many mistook him to be.

In addition, Wright includes several scenes of mirth in his otherwise gory naturalist novels. As Werner Sollors has shown, even as early as in *Lawd Today* (1937; posthumously published), Wright expressed his sense of humor in writing. In highly experimental modernistic style, reminiscent of Gertrude Stein, he described a scene of contagious laughter: "And they laughed because they had laughed. They paused for breath, and then they laughed at how they laughed; and because they had laughed at how they had laughed, they laughed and laughed and laughed" (qtd. in Sollors, "The Clock, the Salesman, and the Breast" 491). *The Outsider* also contains a space-age joke. Black characters in a bar satirize growing white racial anxiety by imagining that Martians might be a colored race, which would make the white race a minority not only on the earth but in the universe as well.

leave out African American perspective(s) on nature from their discussion, as if African Americans had little to say about the subject. Along with Lucille Clifton, Ed Roberson, and many other African American poets whose works are now collected in Camille T. Dungy's *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), Wright's haiku can serve as a compelling corrective to this critical neglect.<sup>196</sup>

Apropos of African American's supposed reticence about nature, let us recall that Wright indeed had shown his appreciation of nature earlier in *Black Boy* (1945), albeit with significant qualifications. Wright's autobiography lyrically captures fleeting moments when nature's "cryptic tongue" with its "coded messages" (7) came through to the black boy growing up in the midst of racialized terror:

There was the wonder I felt when I saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horse clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay.

There was the faint cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning.

There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow,

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<sup>196</sup> In addition to *Black Nature*, Shockley lists *The Environmental Justice Reader* (Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., 2002) and *The Eco Language Reader* (Jonathan Skinner and Brenda Iijima, eds., 2010) as giving voice to the hitherto under-represented groups such as African Americans and other peoples of color in this field (148).

dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez.

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild  
geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky. (8)

As Fabre points out,<sup>197</sup> one can hear the echoes of the last sentence [“crying strings of  
wild geese/ winging south against/ a bleak, autumn sky”] in some of his later haiku:

Crying and crying,

Melodious strings of geese

Passing a graveyard. (120)

Don't they make you sad,

Those wild geese winging southward,

O lonely scarecrow? (581)

From the rainy dark

Come faint white cries of wild geese,--

How lonely it is. (584)

In *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), Wright also colorfully describes the four  
seasons in the South in as many paragraphs. This is how he painted the romantic and  
playful scenes of spring and summer:

Our southern springs are filled with quiet noises and scenes of growth.

Apple buds laugh into blossom. Honeysuckles creep up the sides of houses.

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<sup>197</sup> “The Poetry of Richard Wright” 270.

Sunflowers nod in the hot fields. From mossy tree to mossy tree—oak, elm, willow, aspen, sycamore, dogwood, cedar, walnut, and hickory—bright green leaves jut from a million branches to form an awning that tries to shield and shade the earth. Blue and pink kites of small boys sail in the windy air.

In summer the magnolia trees fill the country side with sweet scent for long miles. Days are slumberous, and the skies are high and thronged with clouds that ride fast. At midday the sun blazes and bleaches the soil. Butterflies flit through the heat; wasps sing their sharp, straight lines; birds fluff and flounce, piping in querulous joy. Nights are covered with canopies sometimes blue and sometimes black, canopies that sag low with ripe and nervous stars. *The throaty boast of frogs momentarily drowns out the call and counter-call of crickets. . . .* (32; emphasis mine)

These vivid descriptions of the American South prefigure the world of his later haiku: apple buds laugh and sunflowers nod; magnolias fill the land with their sweet scent and birds sing joyously; (prefiguring his later haiku) frogs and crickets playfully compete in call-and-response.

But no sooner has he painted these moving and lush pastoral pictures of the South than Wright divulges the horrors and toils hidden underneath their surfaces:

But whether in spring or summer or autumn or winter, time slips past us remorselessly, and it is hard to tell of the iron that lies beneath the surface of our quiet, dull days.

To paint the picture of how we live on the tobacco, cane, rice, and cotton



plantations is to compete with mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspapers, the magazines, and even the Church. They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of the fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks that sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay. (34-35)

Wright's lyrical haiku poems arise from these primal scenes of man-made horror and toil amidst natural beauty. Just as he critically points out, the reality of racial violence and subordination was persistently covered up from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries by the revisionary discourse that Eric Sundquist has later identified as the "plantation mythology" (273). These narratives "of kind masters and contented slaves" (273), propagated by minstrel shows on the stage, on the radio, and in films, as well as by texts such as Joel Chandler Harris' "Uncle Remus" tales, sought to justify slavery and Jim Crow. By nostalgically representing the visual and verbal image of the "happy Negro," the plantation mythology defended the status quo of white supremacy to deter changes in race relations in the post-emancipation era by silencing the dissenting voices of African Americans. If Wright's lyrical representations of the American South in his haiku are devoid of explicit racial conflicts, they should therefore be carefully distinguished from this revisionary discourse of white supremacy. If Wright's haiku restored rich colors, sounds, and textures to the region, it was precisely to challenge the whitewashing of Southern history.

Read autobiographically, Wright's haiku offer an eloquent testament to his ultimate

immunity, or recovery, from racism's epistemological violence. The fact that Wright's haiku foreground his sense of humor and appreciation for beauty in nature speaks amply of the cathartic effects of haiku for the African American author. But haiku had another crucial meaning for Wright. Here again, Blyth's *Haiku* provides an unexpected key. In the section that deals with "the form of haiku," Blyth compares and contrasts the logical structure of haiku to that of syllogism. The 5-7-5 syllabic structure, he claims, "has a wave-like character of flow, suspense and ebb . . . a kind of syllogistic nature . . . which gives it the utmost clarity while actually containing no logical element" (373). To illustrate this point, he quotes Bashō's aforementioned haiku:

The old pond;  
A frog jumps in, --  
The sound of the water.

Blyth then compares the poem to the following syllogism:

All men are mortal;  
A negro is a man,  
Therefore a negro is mortal. (373)

In the syllogism, Blyth points out, there is a clear logical connection between the premise [All men are mortal] and the conclusion [The a negro is mortal]. By contrast, one cannot induce "the sound of the water" from "the old pond" in Bashō's haiku in the same way, even if the "sound of water" may be "contained" in the "pond" (373). Despite their apparent similarity, what distinguishes haiku from syllogism, Blyth argues, is their different objectives. Whereas syllogism seeks to provide the reader with

“ratiocinative satisfaction,” the pleasurable enlightenment gained by successfully inducing the third term (the right answer) from the preceding two, the haiku aims at ineffable “poetical significance” (373). In other words, the goal of haiku lies not in proving the logical inevitability of the third line, but in making the reader relish the subtle poetic effects created by the ingenious bridging of the first two lines to the third one. In this account of the difference between syllogism and haiku, Wright must have discovered a potential use of language quite different from his earlier propagandistic style in *Native Son*. While Wright’s naturalism, like syllogism, uses logic and argumentation to counter racism’s dehumanization of African Americans and asks the reader to infer African Americans’ humanity, Wright’s poetic visions projected in the haiku manner preempt the very question of black humanity. In other words, they performatively pre-inscribe African American humanity as a starting point rather than as a goal.<sup>198</sup>

#### IV. Towards a Poetics of “Complex Simplicity” I: The Transcultural Perspectives of Wright’s Haiku and the Textual Politics of Gender and Race

In 1949, James Baldwin published “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” In this famous article, the young author criticized Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as the quintessence of protest literature, which ironically reduced African Americans to a

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<sup>198</sup> The anthropomorphic celebration of animals and plants also confirms the humanity of the narrator/observer as a given.

series of stereotypes, albeit in the name of abolitionism. Furthermore, Baldwin singled out Wright's *Native Son* as a representative literary offspring of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and attacked it for uncritically perpetuating this tradition, which in his view was dehumanizing. To strike his point home, the article drew the reader's attention to a scene in which Wright's embittered protagonist Bigger Thomas jealously looks up at an airplane in the sky. Looking enviously at the sky, Bigger is bitterly reminded of what has been denied African Americans.<sup>199</sup> Reading this scene as a pivotal moment that defined Bigger Thomas's character, Baldwin harshly criticized Wright for making "[a]ll of Bigger's life" as if it were exclusively "controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear" (18). "Bigger's tragedy," continued Baldwin, "is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black."<sup>200</sup> The real tragedy of the victim-turned-criminal was "that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth."<sup>201</sup> Baldwin's polemical essay ends by underscoring the necessity of embracing humanity as a matter of fact rather than protesting and begging for it: "But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what

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<sup>199</sup> Only a year before the publication of *Native Son* (1940), a bill was finally passed by Congress to provide federal funding for training African American pilots. This bill would lead to the creation of the famous Tuskegee Airmen during WWII (see Abha Sood Patel, "Tuskegee Airmen"). Even as late as in 1974, however, Muhammad Ali was still surprised to discover (with pleasure) that the plane he got on in Zaire was being flown by a black pilot (see Ali's documentary, *When We Were Kings*, 1996).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

is infinitely more difficult—that is accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power . . .”<sup>202</sup>

While Baldwin accurately pointed out the telling irony of *Native Son*, the two African American writers’ views about the aesthetic and ethical roles of literature were not so different as the younger author made them out to be. Prefiguring his subsequent critique of the frog perspectives, Wright himself had criticized the subservient and supplicant role that African American writers had been forced to play as early as in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937): “prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America,” who “entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human” (97). Written in his Communist years, the article rejected bourgeois African American literature, which in his view irresponsibly catered to the white audience. This strain of African American writing, he argued, misguidedly sought to prove the humanity of African Americans to the white audience, or even worse, to satisfy their taste for the “quaint” and the “exotic.” His creative remedy, of course, was *Native Son*. In retrospect, however, the naturalist novel ironically turned out to be primarily concerned with disproving African American inferiority that it ended up making the very mistake that Wright had warned other black writers against.

“Blueprint for Negro Writing” was Wright’s theoretical search for a perspective that would enable him to move beyond the litany of protest and mourning. The article called on his fellow African American writers to emulate their vernacular traditions,

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

such as folklore, blues, gospel, and work song. While turning to the African American vernacular cultural expressions for a model and a source of inspiration, the new “Negro” writing, Wright argued, was to constitute an essential part of the “world republic of letters”<sup>203</sup>:

His [The new “Negro” writer’s] vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence, should be there. To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a *complex simplicity*. Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway,

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<sup>203</sup> I borrowed this term from Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (2004). Wright would have concurred with Casanova’s characterization of Paris as “at once the intellectual capital of the world, the arbiter of good taste, and (at least in the mythological account that later circulated throughout the entire world) the source of political democracy: an idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived” (23). Granted that it was in Paris that Wright encountered haiku, I nevertheless take issue with Casanova’s admittedly Eurocentric representation of the city as “the capital of the literary world” (26). While Casanova virtually posits everything French as a stand-in for the universal, my purpose in foregrounding the African American author’s de-Occidentalizing engagement with the non-Western poetic tradition at the heart of Europe’s literary capital is to critique her fascinating and yet Eurocentric history of world literature, which fails to historicize the kind of literary encounter that I have been describing. In other words, Wright’s haiku compels us to recognize more ways through which different literary traditions in the world have crossed paths than Casanova’s book suggests.

and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro writer.

*Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications.* (103; italics mine)

Wright no doubt would have added Bashō, Issa and the numerous other haiku poets that he would encounter over twenty years later through Blyth's work as part of this common world cultural heritage. "No matter far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications," these Japanese poets were to provide Wright with "ready grist for his mill" in his effort to practice his own version of transnational and transracial poetics of "complex simplicity."

Wright had expressed a similar desire to reconceive African American literature from a transracial and transnational perspective even earlier in the short speech entitled "Personalism" (c.1935-37). In this unpublished five-page text, he explored the possibility of sublimating the petite bourgeois "theory of art for the sake of art" (1-2) in order to transform literature into a kind of revolutionary "anti-literature" (4), an artistically autonomous vehicle of radical individualism which was nevertheless to be informed with "the highest intensity of social consciousness possible" (3). What is particularly relevant for the present discussion is the transcultural nature of his projected poetics: "Personalism will use all techniques, or part or wholes of techniques, such a[s] dadaism, surrealism, imagism, symbolism, realism, etc. as vehicles of expression" (4). Significantly, Wright imagined this new "Negro" poetics to consist not only of

Anglo-European literary schools:

The basic unit of personalist creation will be the image, that is, an emotional perception of reality. The unity, emotional and philosophic, of these images will constitute the ruling symbol of the work. This symbol, constituted of images born of emotional perception will carry organically embedded within it, the message or judgment of the writer. This image can be as simple as the picture of rain; it can be as complex as a character of Dostoevsky's. The symbol can be as simple as that used by Japanese writers in their short stories. . . . (4)

Unfortunately, there is no record to identify which Japanese writers Wright here referred to. In any case, this short text confirms Wright's aspiration for a transnational and transracial, in short, planetary poetics from the beginning of his literary career: "From the personalist point of view the question of universality is resolved in psychological terms. The subject matter can be drawn from whatever sphere of life the writer chooses. The universality of the work will depend on the mode of presentation" (4).

It is important to note, however, that Wright did not just imitate the spirit and "simple" form of haiku in English when he encountered it over two decades later. The rest of this chapter will explore his transcultural adaptation of the Japanese poetic tradition. As Hakutani, among others, has pointed out, some of Wright's haiku do not strictly follow all the general conventions of the classical haiku tradition. In classical haiku poetry, the subjectivity of the narrator/the poet is often erased to achieve the ideal



of *mu* [impersonality] in Zen philosophy. To be sure, Issa, who repeatedly inserts his presence into his haiku, is the obvious exception to the rule, which again suggests Issa's particular influence on Wright. In any case, Wright's haiku attest to the fact that he creatively transformed the Japanese tradition by projecting the narrator/the poet's feelings, moods, and desires onto the objects s/he depicts: "I grant to sparrows/ The telegraph wires that brought/ Me such good tidings!"; "As my anger ebbs,/ The spring stars grow bright again,/ And the wind returns"; "If pumpkins could talk,/ I am sure that they would be/Reactionary!"; "Don't they make you sad,/ Those wild geese winging southward,/ O lonely scarecrow?"; "I almost forgot/ To hang up an autumn moon/Over the mountain."

Instead of being dismissed as a "deviation" from the "authenticity" of the Japanese tradition, this aspect of Wright's haiku should be recognized as a transcultural adaptation, which repeats the haiku's mode of presentation while revising it. In fact, Wright seems to have been conscious of what he was doing, for he deliberately referred to his poems not as "haiku" proper but as "projections in the haiku manner." Also, one can read Wright's adaptation of haiku as a parallel innovation of the form at the hands of modern Japanese haiku poets, such as Yoshioka Zenjido (1889-1961), who in 1933 declared that "haiku is nothing but a poem consisting of seventeen letters" (qtd. in Tajima 40). In other words, Zenjido, along with many young poets, called for a modernization of haiku, abolishing the conventional inclusion of a season word and/or the departure from the conventional 5-7-5 structure. In fact, even as Lewis G. Alexander noted as early as in 1923, Bashō left some haiku that deviated from the conventional

structure, and others without a season word.<sup>204</sup>

The most conspicuous instance of Wright's adaptation is an insertion of the poet's presence within haiku. Again, this adaptation parallels modern Japanese poets' effort to innovate the form, most famously by Mizuhara Shuōshi (1892-1981), who advocated the subjective projection of feelings through the haiku form in the 1930s.<sup>205</sup> Whereas the world that classical haiku poets conventionally depicted was a world of nature, devoid of human presence except for the un-intrusive observing narrator, some of Wright's haiku—like those of modern haiku poets (“innovative” or “deviant,” depending on how one assesses their experiment)—prominently feature human beings, some of whom are racially marked while others are not. Here again, the reader is struck by an unmistakable difference between the characters in *Native Son*, who are little more than racialized stereotypes, and the diverse and colorful characters who inhabit his haiku universe. For instance, haiku 753 reflects Wright's comic attitude to death, which is as playful as uncanny:

I saw the dead man  
Impatiently brush away  
The flies from his mouth.

The humorous and paradoxically “lively” state of the man in this poem reminds the reader neither of the gruesome deaths depicted in *Native Son* nor the dry abstract idea of mortality in Blyth's syllogism. It also reminds the blurring of life and death in an earlier

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<sup>204</sup> Ueda 4; Tajima 39-40; Alexander, “Japanese Hokkus” (67).

<sup>205</sup> Tajima 10-12.

cited frog poem: Glittering with frog/ A dead frog squats livingly/ In the garden path.  
(815).

Furthermore, Wright significantly expands the thematic range of the Japanese tradition by using its mode of representation to depict the lives of the poor and the marginalized in the third person, which is unconventional in the writings of classical haiku poets<sup>206</sup>:

In a drizzling rain,  
In a flower shop's doorway,  
A girl sells herself. (415)

The Christmas season:  
A whore is painting her lips  
Larger than they are. (365)

These haiku deliberately create dissonance by representing the characters' out-of-placeness within each scene. While the flower shop evokes beauty, the pathetic girl sells—not flowers, as one would expect—but herself in the rain. Conventionally, the Christmas season is associated with the warmth of a family gathering in front of a fireplace (despite the cold weather outside), but Wright disrupts the harmonious mood

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<sup>206</sup> Again, modern haiku frequently since the 1930s began to address social problems—war, prostitution, poverty within a capitalist society, incarceration, etc. Tajima notes that Yamaguchi Seishi was a major proponent of such socially informed haiku (32). For instance, “The May Day parade/ As if it were the summer festival/ Kids awaiting excitedly” (qtd. in Tajima 32; translation mine).

of the holiday season by drawing the reader's attention to a sex worker standing (probably alone) on the street waiting for a client to come along.

The dissonance created through Wright's seemingly simple representations of the marginalized women (whose national and racial identities are unspecified) in the above haiku begs the complex question as to whether these scenes instantiate his literary acquiescence to, or reenactment of, the society's misogyny or his self-reflexive intervention to indict the sexual and economic exploitation of women. This is a good place to reconsider Wright's notorious literary misogyny, which has been duly noted and criticized by many readers and critics.<sup>207</sup> Beginning with Bigger Thomas's violent dismemberment and immolation of Mary Dalton (a radical daughter of a wealthy white family in Chicago) and the rape and murder of Bessie Mears (Bigger's African American girlfriend) in *Native Son* to Cross Damon's cold detachment towards his African American wife as well as to his black and white lovers (including a white sex worker) in *The Outsider*, Wright's literary misogyny ironically cuts across the color-line and class divisions, even if his literary treatment of black and white women is quite different.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> See Keady, Sylvia. "Richard Wright's Women Characters and Inequality" (1976); Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers" (1984); Maria K. Mootry, "Bitches, Whores, and Women Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright" (1984); Trudier Harris, "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters" (1990); Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright" (1995); Sondra Guttman, "What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*" (2001).

<sup>208</sup> As many critics have already noted, Wright's negative representations of women

Instead of simply denouncing Wright's misogyny, Paul Gilroy has offered probably the most nuanced interpretation of his representation of gender. "While leaving the question of Wright's own views of women open," he carefully looks at how Wright constructs and contests various forms of black masculinity and femininity, juxtaposing his "complex [and racially "uneven"] misogyny" to "his path-breaking inauguration of a critical discourse on the construction of black masculinity" (176). In reconsidering Wright's representation of gender, Gilroy has also noted "the few tantalizing feminist and proto-feminist statements sprinkled around his work" (176). For instance, after the success of *Native Son*, he sought to address the plight of female domestic workers in Harlem and Brooklyn in a novel. The project was aborted, though he left a 960-page draft.<sup>209</sup> During the aforementioned Paris conference in 1956 Wright also critically remarked on the complete absence of female delegates: "When and if we hold another conference—and I hope we will—I hope there shall be an effective utilization of Negro womanhood in the world to help us mobilize and pool our forces. Perhaps some hangover of influence has colored our attitude, or perhaps this was an oversight. In our struggle for freedom, against great odds, we cannot afford to ignore one half of our manpower, that is the force of women and their active collaboration. Black men will not be free until their women are free" (*Présence Africaine* 348).<sup>210</sup>

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significantly differed according to their race. Among others, see Alan W. France, "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's *Native Son*" (1990) and Sondra Guttman, "What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*" (2001).

<sup>209</sup> Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright* 20, 28.

<sup>210</sup> Vols. 8-10. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1956. In addition, in a 1947 interview with a

Moreover, “Man of All Work,” a short story collected in the posthumously published *Eight Men* (1961), poignantly probes the sexualized psycho-drama of interracial relations by representing its protagonist in a socially and economically marginalized place where he is forced to cross-dress as a female servant in a white middle-class home. The tragicomic short story foregrounds the performativity of racialized gender identities as well as the sexual and economic exploitation of black female workers [Carl, the story’s protagonist, gets almost raped by the unsuspecting white employer]; in *Pagan Spain*, Wright also critiqued the subordination of women (the dichotomous division of women into “virgins” and “whores” in the Catholic Spain). These few (proto-) feminist statements certainly call for more nuanced readings of the author’s representations of masculinity and femininity, both black and white.

Applying Gilroy’s insights (and warning not to confuse Wright’s and his public pronouncements about issues of gender too carelessly), how should the reader now decode the representations of women in Wright’s haiku? In her sympathetic reading of the poems in question, Shawnrece D. Campbell has argued that Wright’s haiku about women “portray how and why the female subject . . . are relegated to a script dictated

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French reporter, Wright names Sartre’s play, *The Respectful Prostitute*, as the French literary expression that “struck him most” (Kinnamon and Fabre 119). The play explored the racial dimension of the 1931 trial of the Scottsboro Boys, who were falsely accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama. Sartre focused on the cooptation of a white prostitute, who stands by one of the accused black boys at the beginning, but finally gives into a white patriarchal power structure of the community. For more, see Steve Martinot, “Skin For Sale: Race and the Respectful Prostitute.”

by the conjunction of institutional capitalism, racism, and Judeo-Christian ethics” (68). In contrast to the “Japanese noblemen, priests, writers, singers, and artists who had the time to find beauty and pleasure in natural phenomena,” Campbell has argued, “Wright’s female subjects have to contend with the negative aspects of nature” (61), such as rain and snow, which reinforce their pain and suffering. Needless to say, Campbell misidentifies haiku, the historically democratic tradition among the folk, as a privileged art form of the few. More importantly, Campbell arrives, too quickly in my view, at her interpretation of Wright’s haiku about women when she reads them as an unequivocal critique of patriarchy. Here an important question remains to be answered by her supposedly feminist interpretation. How does one know that a representation of women’s suffering and pain in itself constitute a critique? Following Campbell’s logic, one can just as equally argue that the feminists who have criticized Wright’s earlier naturalist representations of women who are murdered and raped should instead have celebrated him for depicting their suffering and pain.

The marginalization of women represented in Wright’s haiku, I think, cannot be unequivocally read either as a critique of or acquiescence to—let alone as active participation in perpetuating—patriarchy. I propose a different way of approaching the representation of gender in Wright’s haiku that will nevertheless require us to reconsider the general critical consensus on Wright’s literary misogyny. Whereas Campbell exclusively focuses on Wright’s haiku that apparently deal with the marginalization of women and ignores other poems featuring female characters, I propose to look at all of his haiku featuring women as a whole. For instance, the

following romantic haiku represents a woman in a manner rarely seen in his novels:

As my delegate,  
The spring wind has its fingers  
In a young girl's hair. (209)

Of course, one might still take a critical stance towards this poem. If we suppose that the narrator is a straight male, he treats the young girl as nothing but an object of his desire. Be that as it may, this poem hints at a male-female relationship that is rarely (if ever) seen in Wright's fiction, which had often foregrounded fear, hostility and distance between male and female characters. As we shall see in the next section, this poem is not the only instance that represents women as more than objectified victims of male desire and violence.

#### V. Blackness of Blackness in Wright's Haiku: The Poetics of Indeterminacy

Whereas the women in the haiku quoted above are racially unmarked, Wright also left a handful of haiku featuring racially identified/identifiable women:

Sun is glinting on  
A washerwoman's black arms  
In cold creek water. (60)

A black woman sings:  
Filling the sunlight with steam,



Bubbling molasses. (452)

While humming a song,

A black girl lays out white fish

On shining palm leaves. (3507 [unpublished])<sup>211</sup>

Due to the lack of context and the absence of the poet's commentary to situate the images, these poems are again open to multiple interpretations, leaving it up to the reader to decide, for instance, whether the black women are singing/humming songs of sorrow or songs of joy. In other words, they can equally be read as depicting the toils of black female laborers (thereby protesting racial subjugation) or celebrating the black women's harmonious immersion in nature.

In similar ways, Wright also painted images of working black men:

Black men with big brooms

Sweeping streets in falling snow,

Are absorbed by flakes. (609)

Dragging long big bags,

Black men frighten the cotton

To a deeper white. (3575 [unpublished])<sup>212</sup>

Given the already established association of snow with racialized whiteness in *Native Son*, or the rigid figurative chain that conventionally bonded cotton to the traumatic

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<sup>211</sup> Richard Wright Papers. Box 78 Folder 873.

<sup>212</sup> Richard Wright Papers. Box 78 Folder 873.

memories of slavery and share-cropping in the African American imagination, these images seem to lend themselves more easily to negative rather than positive interpretations. But again, we should pause before too hastily reading race into these poems, precisely because the recurring figure of snow in his haiku is emphatically deracialized:

Just enough of snow  
For a boy's finger to write  
His name on the porch. (33)

Venturing outdoors,  
The children walk timidly,  
Respecting the snow. (35)

A brick tenement  
Is receiving furniture  
In a light snowfall. (36)

Past the window pane  
A solitary snowflake  
Spins furiously. (37)

Just enough of snow  
To make the back of each cow

Vivid in the dusk. (107)

“What a huge snowflake!”

But as I spoke my hot breath

Made it disappear. (486)

Standing in the field,

I hear the whispering of

Snowflake to snowflake. (489)

The sport stadium:

Every seat is taken

By whirling snowflakes. (500)

The same goes for cotton, although this imagery appears less frequently than snow.

A lost cow mews

In the sunset fleeciness

Of a cotton field. (386)

A fluff of cotton

Floats up and is swallowed

By a vast white cloud. (549)

From a cotton field

To magnolia trees,

A bridge of swallow. (725)

As Schettler has correctly pointed out, in Wright's haiku, "[r]ace is implicitly present, but racism is not" (50). Since the figures of snow and cotton, like magnolia, are racially neutralized in his haiku on the symbolic level, there seems to be no reason to read the earlier poems as an indictment of racism, as Richard A. Iadonisi has done (88). Rather than trying to determine Wright's "intention" behind these poems on the level of (literal or metaphoric) meaning, which I believe will be always subjective, I suggest that we read them instead on the meta-level of signification. In other words, the value of these poems lies, in my view, in the fact that the indeterminate role of race in itself breaks the rigid figurative chain that automatically imposes racialized readings. Such racial indeterminacy, I argue, serves as the confirmation of Wright's freedom (however temporary) from racialized thinking. According to Blyth, indeterminacy of meaning is at once the strength and the weakness of haiku. Again comparing haiku to music, he explains:

We may note in passing that Japanese readers will all have slightly different translations and meanings to give most of these verses. This is both the power and the weakness of haiku. It is a weakness in that we are not quite sure of the meaning of the writer. It is a power in that haiku demands the *free* poetic life of the reader in parallel with that of the poet. This "freedom" is not that of wild irresponsibility and arbitrary interpretation, but that of creation of a similar poetic experience to which haiku points. It corresponds very much in

English poetry to the different, the very different way in which people read the same poem. In the interpretation of music, conductors vary greatly in emphasis and tempo. There are cases on record where a conductor has for example greatly increased the tempo of a movement, [with] the astonished approval of the composer (Beethoven). (11-12)

As Fabre has analyzed in detail, the following haiku is a perfect example of the rich indeterminacy of Wright's haiku poetics:

In the falling snow  
A laughing boy holds out his palms  
Until they are white. (31)

Just as in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, whose protagonist poignantly aspires to the ideal of whiteness, does the black boy secretly desire to be white? Or is this instead a more innocent scene that vividly represents the black child's pure joy at seeing the snow? I would suggest that both meanings coexist, without invalidating each other.

Take another haiku about a black boy:

The green cockleburs  
Caught in the thick wooly hair  
Of the black boy's head. (455)

Iadonisi has read this poem along with other haiku featuring black characters as having a hidden message of racial protest beneath "the pictorial level" (87). Citing an episode that Wright records in *The Color Curtain*, where an African American reporter secretly

straightens her hair in self-denial,<sup>213</sup> Iadonisi suggests that this haiku can be read both as an affirmation or a denial of blackness represented by the “thick wooly hair” of the boy (86-89). No sooner does he register the indeterminate double meaning of Wright’s haiku, however, Iadonisi quickly takes away its significance by privileging what he views as the hidden (and by implication, “true”) message of racial protest. In other words, he reduces the liberating indeterminacy of meaning in Wright’s haiku by ironically re-racializing it.

In addition to the death haiku already cited, there are several more that blur the line between life and death:

An empty sickbed:

An indented white pillow

In weak winter sun. (425)

This poem leaves the reader wondering whether the patient might have died or recovered and gotten out of bed. Similarly, haiku 53 and 121 keeps the fate a mystery:

A sparrow’s feather

On a barb of rusty wire

In the sizzling heat. (53)

The consumptive man,

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<sup>213</sup> Wright interprets this practice as her way of saying to her white roommate, “Forgive me. I’m sorry that I’m black; I’m ashamed that my hair is not like yours. But you see that I’m doing all that I can to be like you. . . .” (818).

Who lives in the room next door,

Did not cough today. (121)

Iadonisi reads this poem as unequivocally alluding to the man's death (82), but there is really no way of knowing his fate.

The snail haiku that we have already examined offers a comic version of the poetics of indeterminacy: "Make up your mind, Snail!/ You are half inside your house,/ And halfway out!" (7).

Similarly, Issa's haiku quoted at the beginning of this chapter—"A world of grief and pain/ Flowers bloom; /Even then. . .—is powerful because it eloquently speaks of the indeterminate coexistence of hope and despair. Who knows if beauty truly eases grief and pain?

## VI. Wright's Poetics of Disarmament and the Transcultural Remaking of Haiku

I would also take issue with Iadonisi's claim that Wright used haiku as his "weapon." Iadonisi refers to the earlier discussed scene in *Native Son*, where Bigger enviously looks at an airplane in the sky. In reply to his friend who jokingly remarks, "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane," Bigger answers, "Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly, 'Cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell. . . ." (460; emphasis and ellipsis Wright). Projecting Wright on Bigger, Iadonisi concludes:

[W]hile Wright adopts the traditional seventeen-syllable form and description of nature so successfully that many critics praise the authenticity of his haiku, like Bigger's dreamed-of airplane, Wright loads his haiku with linguistic "bombs" that he drops to remind his readers of social inequities. While the haiku themselves serve as a suitable vehicle for Wright, the fact that he looks to Japan for literary inspiration is also significant. Wright argues that colonizers historically require "an Arcadia, a Land's End, a Shangri-la, a world peopled by shadow men, a world that would permit free play for [their] repressed instincts." Because Japan has served as this "Shangri-la," Wright finds it to be an ideal "airport" from which to launch his "sorties" against the dominant culture. (88-89)

This reading, in my view, is unwarranted in light of Wright's de-Occidentalizing outlook in the late 1950s. By the time Wright wrote these haiku (or, as I have argued, even as early as when he wrote "Personalism" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing"), he had begun to search for ways to move beyond "the frog perspectives," which ironically reinforced the dichotomy between the dominant and the dominated in the very act of protesting against white supremacy. Unlike *Native Son*, which was an utter failure in this respect, Wright's late writings embraced (not just in theory but also in practice) an increasingly transcivilizational/transcultural perspective that refused to represent the world starkly divided into the dominant/the West and the dominated/the non-West.

Wright the intellectual may have continued to endorse conditional use of counter-violence against colonialism until the end of his life. By contrast, Wright the



cosmopolitan haiku poet, I argue, chose a different path of decolonization. To claim that Wright used haiku to *combat* the white West's Orientalist appropriations of the non-Western tradition is to miss the true significance of his trans-cultural politics of de-Occidentalization and disarmament. I have shown how Wright had come to emphasize commonality and reconciliation among different cultures and races rather than conflict and difference between them. After all, just as he had believed that "no atom or hydrogen bombs can make a man Western" (*White Man, Listen!* 724), Wright must have come to a realization that the *anti-Western* linguistic "bombs" would not effect a truly equitable and lasting de-Occidentalization of the human kind. Emphatically not *anti-Western*, his de-Occidentalism was a shorthand for a critique of ethno-national parochialism of all kinds, no matter in what color it may be conceived.

One would do well to recall at this point that Wright understood Japanese fascism as a peculiar product of partial Occidentalization, a hybrid of the East and the West with a devastating consequence.<sup>214</sup> If Japan's earlier naval victory over Russia in 1905 marked for him a significant beginning of the de-Occidentalization of the world, Japan's subsequent rise as (or degeneration into) a colored empire taught him an important

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<sup>214</sup> "What would be the ultimate results of welding this Asian consciousness with its present content of race and religion on the techniques of the twentieth century? Was not Japanese Fascism the flower of such incongruous grafting of plants of different genres? There is no indication that the Japanese abandoned any of their earlier mystical notions when they embraced the disciplines of science and the techniques of modern industrial production. It is not difficult to imagine Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and Shintoists launching vast crusades, armed with modern weapons, to make the world safe for their mystical notions" (*The Color Curtain* 606).

lesson in the danger of certain Western ideologies being embraced by the non-West. Far from seeing it as an ideal military base from which to mount a cultural attack against the West, he therefore critiqued Japan's militarization in the 30s and 40s not as a sign of de-Occidentalization but as its diametrical opposite.

At the same time, Wright also learned, from Blyth's *Haiku* that a different kind of cultural hybridization had taken place in Japan: "Haiku is the final flower of all Eastern culture" (Blyth iii). Freed from ethno-national parochialism, haiku, as Blyth conceived it, resulted from crosspollination of various Asian cultural sources. In fact, Wright went further than Blyth when he became a (de-Occidentalized) Western heir to this tradition. If Blyth never dreamed of the emergence of a haiku community in the English language, Wright, along with many others, took part in a creative deterritorialization of the Japanese tradition and transformed it into a transcivilizational/transcultural expression that mediated the East and the West, while duly recognizing its cultural roots in the East. To put it in different terms, in adopting and adapting the haiku form in English, Wright planted the seeds of commonalities beyond race and the nation state for a future world republic or "kingdom of culture" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 6) despite his knowledge of the existing social and political realities of difference and inequity. Haiku 630 brilliantly illustrates this point. Rendered in the haiku manner, the poem represents a simple but complex scene of cultural hybridization in the American South. Whereas Wright was an atheist, the narrator of this haiku humorously sees an African American religious ritual as an eclectic fusion of animism and Christianity.

For each baptized,

The brown creek laughs and gurgles,

Flowing on its way. (630)

Laughing and gurgling, this poem celebrates cultural hybridity (no doubt “heretic” in the eyes of the orthodox purist!) at once in its form and content. The African-Americanized haiku encourages the reader to envision a larger river downstream where cultural tributaries such as this one will flow together to form a transracial and transnational republic/kingdom of culture, a de-Occidentalized utopia.

Wright may also be credited with pioneering the genre of jazz haiku, which will flourish in the hands of such African American poets as James A. Emanuel in the following decades. In a beautiful image of synesthesia, jazz makes an entry into the world of haiku. Here again, one may also hear the assonance of m’s and t’s:

From a tenement,

The blue jazz of a trumpet

Weaving autumn mists. (253)

Blurring the cultural boundaries, these poems affirm an already established fact or an on-going process of cultural hybridization.

As a beguilingly simple demonstration of Wright’s complex humanity and of his ability to draw creatively from multiple cultural traditions, his haiku shatters the conventional image of the African American author as someone who angrily or despairingly sought but was unable to find his way out of the stifling ghetto of the “Negro” culture, which he had once notoriously called hopeless and barren in *Black Boy*. Far from being an always somber and embittered anti-Western rebel who violently and

desperately protested against the dehumanization of the “Negro” with the weapon of his words or a culturally insensitive Eurocentric rationalist in black skin, Wright in his last years (indeed, as I have shown, from the beginning of his literary career) aspired to a cosmopolitan utopia and sought to capture “all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence.” In fact, Wright cautiously prophesied during an interview in 1953 that “it’s possible that the American Negro Literature in the long run will become a literature in which the problems of the world are summarized.”<sup>215</sup> Wright’s “un-Negro-like Negro” writing certainly became a harbinger of this globally re-conceived African American literature.

## VII. Towards a Poetics of “Complex Simplicity” II: Transnational Diffusion of the Blues

The subsection “The Problem of Perspective” in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” provides another vital key for understanding Wright’s poetics of “complex simplicity,” which he practiced not only through haiku but also through his blues-inspired poems. At first glance, his recognition of the world’s common cultural heritage in “Personalism” and “Blueprint for Negro Writing” may resemble Matthew Arnold’s (1822-88) resurrection of “culture” in the 19th century as the “best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light” (79). But Wright’s definition of “culture” was much more global

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<sup>215</sup> Kinnamon and Fabre 155.

and capacious than that of the liberal Victorian Englishman or even that of W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously shunned blues and jazz. “Everywhere” for Arnold meant “everywhere” only in Europe; the “moral perfection” consisted only of “beauty,” “harmony,” and “sweetness” (67-68; 73). In contrast, “culture” for the cosmopolitan African American author groomed in the violence of racism and poverty could not simply and innocently be about the brighter sides of life. For Wright, “every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility” meant not only the “high” Western cultural tradition with its “sweetness and light” but also the African American vernacular forms such as work songs and blues, which helped African Americans to bear—and bear witness to—the pain, anger, fear, as well as the strangeness and the magic wonder of their lives, all of which made up the “complex simplicity” of their experiences in the world.

In “The Problem of Perspective,” Wright argued that “perspective” was the most important question the writer must consider, even if (or because) it was a “part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never directly puts upon paper”:

It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things. . . .

Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere . . . (103-04)

In “The Literature of Negro in the United States” twenty years later,<sup>216</sup> Wright continued to emphasize the significance of acquiring broadly comparative perspectives. Wright here defined the African American literature as an ambivalent fruit of racism. He went on to classify African American cultural expressions during Jim Crow by dividing them into subgroups. The first group, including literature, constituted what he called “this melancholy tale” (744) in which African American experience was rendered from the perspective of a helpless victim: “The Negro writer had no choice in his subject matter; he could not select his experiences. Hence, the monotonous repetition of horror that rolls in verse from one generation to another” (744). This “tradition of bitterness” (745) was then juxtaposed to the second group, which he called, alluding to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “The Forms of Things Unknown” (747). This tradition consisted of “folk utterances, spirituals, blues, work songs, and folklore” (747). If literature was negatively identified more or less as a middle-class occupation, out of touch with how the majority of African Americans led their lives, Wright celebrated these vernacular cultural expressions of the black working class as a powerful record not just of their pain and despair, but also of their tireless struggle for freedom and equality, and above all, of their uninhibited desire for pleasure and sensuality that marked them as all too human.

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<sup>216</sup> This text was originally written in the late 1945 or in the early 1946. That Wright chose to use it during his lecture circuit confirms his abiding admiration for the black vernacular expressions.

Just as in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” two decades earlier, Wright here proudly argued that the value of these anonymously produced cultural forms transcended narrow borders of the United States. In fact, he identified black vernacular culture as African Americans’ greatest contribution not only to the United States but also to the world at large: “This is a service to America and to the world” (769). If the “Negro” was identified as “America’s metaphor” (734) in a purely negative sense earlier in the lecture, Wright now argued, “the voice of the American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and oppressed people anywhere in the world today” (769).

Wright seems to have forgotten here that he had actually written a blues and several blues-inspired poems himself while in the United States. “King Joe (Joe Louis Blues)” (1941), for instance, was a blues that celebrated the life of the world heavyweight boxing champion. Wright wrote the lyrics, to which the jazz musician Count Basie (1904-84) added the music, and the bass singer/prominent communist activist Paul Robeson (1898-1976) sang the finished song. Following the typical A-A-B structure, the lyrics extol Louis as a racial hero in a manner similar to the folklore in praise of John Henry:

Black-eyed peas ask cornbread: What make you so strong?

Black-eyed peas ask cornbread: What make you so strong?

Cornbread say: I come from Alabam, where Joe Louis was born.

...

Old Joe wrestled Ford engines, Lord, it was a shame;

Say old Joe hugged Ford engines, Lord, it was a shame;  
And he turned engine himself and went to the fighting game.

...<sup>217</sup>

Known for his gentlemanly and respectable manner outside the ring, Joe Louis (1914-81) is subversively turned into a trickster who wears a Dunbarian mask of deception<sup>218</sup>:

Wonder what Joe Louis thinks when he's fighting a white man,  
Say wonder what Joe thinks when he's fighting a white man?  
Bet he thinks what I'm thinking, 'cause he wears a deadpan.

In anticipation of the hero's eventual retirement, the singer wails:

Lord, I hate to see old Joe Louis step down,  
Lord, I hate to see old Joe Louis step down,  
But I bet a million dollars no man will ever wear his crown.

Having a distant echo to his frog haiku, Wright features familiar figures in the African American folklore in the last stanza:

Bullfrog told boll weevil; Joe's done quit the ring,  
Bullfrog told boll weevil; Joe's done quit the ring,

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<sup>217</sup> Richard Wright Papers Box 84 Folder 975; rpt. in Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* 248-49.

<sup>218</sup> Here I refer to Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1872-96) poem, "We Wear the Mask" (1896), which begins with "We wear the mask that grins and lies,/ It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--/This debt we pay to human guile;/ With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,/ And mouth with myriad subtleties" (71).



Boll weevil say; He ain't gone and he's still the king.

Wright's blues confirms that his naturalist pitch constituted only a portion of his much broader literary vocal range. Although he sharply opposed (bourgeois) African American writing to the working-class cultural expressions, he himself had already succeeded in breaking the supposed wall between the two.

Wright had also produced explicitly political blues-inspired poems. As has been noted, he was under surveillance by the FBI while he was still in the United States.<sup>219</sup> In a clever, satiric poem from around 1949, Wright, like a contemporary rapper, creatively sublimated his quarrel with the U.S. government into a work of art:

That old FB eye  
Tied a bell to my bed stall  
Said old FB eye  
Tied a bell to my bed stall  
Each time I love my baby, gover'ment knows it all.

Woke up this morning  
FB eye under my bed  
Said I woke up this morning  
FB eye under my bed

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<sup>219</sup> The surveillance started in 1942, after the publication of *Twelve Million Black Voices* the year before. The FBI's file on the writer is now available on the web. See <http://vault.fbi.gov/Richard%20Nathaniel%20Wright>

Told me all I dreamed last night, every word I said.

Every where I look, Lord

I find FB eyes

I'm getting sick and tired of govern'ment spies. . . .

Got them blues, blues, blues

Them mean old FB eye blues

Said I got them blues, blues, blues

Them dirty FB eye blues

Somebody tell me something, some good news. . . . (c. 1949)<sup>220</sup>

As he struggled financially in his last years of life, Wright briefly wrote liner notes for such musicians as Louis Jordan, Big Bill Broonzy, and Quincy Jones to supplement his ever decreasing income. This stint led to his renewed interest in composing blues-inspired poems. These poems from the very last few months of his life followed the standard themes of gloom, sadness, as well as the fear of an imminent death, as one can see in "Blue Snow Blues"<sup>221</sup>:

. . . Said I don't ever mind

These autumn days too much

I can lean hard on my whiskey

And trust it like a crutch.

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<sup>220</sup> Rpt. in Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* 249-50.

<sup>221</sup> Richard Wright Papers. Box 84 Folder 963; c.1960.

But, Lord, when I see that  
White snow swirling down  
Said, Lord, when I see that  
Old white snow swirling down  
I feel that my grave is calling me  
From deep, deep in the ground. . . .

The arrival of winter evokes in the poet a terrible fear of death and the “old white snow” here seems to allude not just to the freezing coldness of winter but also to chilling memories of racism. To be sure, one does not have to read race into the poem, for the racial and national identity of the poet is not specified, but the blues form strongly encourages the reader to identify the poet as an African American, to read this in the context of Jim Crow.

Other blues-inspired poems from this period more clearly reflect Wright’s widening global, transracial perspective. “The Blues of the Hunted” is told from the point of view of a lonely shell-shocked veteran of WWII.<sup>222</sup> The identity of this poem’s narrator is again racially *and* nationally indeterminate, but this time much more explicitly so than in “Blue Snow Blues”:

This high free blue sky is far from  
The death that Hitler built.  
But my friends are like the ones that Hitler kilt.

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<sup>222</sup> Richard Wright Papers. Box 84 Folder 964.

Every time I stop to listen

I remember crying:

Wild wails of children left by soldiers dying. . . .

I don't want to know why I walk

Along this street alone.

And if I try to remember my mind's gone. . . .

.

Each time I see a human face

A lump of ice [fills] me.

If I'm scared it's because I think you'll kill me.<sup>223</sup>

I want to ask these [tall] buildings

To fall down and crush me.

But I'll scream if you just so much as touch me.

If I let my tears wet my eyes

Memory spills in a flood.

And then all I can see is the sight of blood.

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<sup>223</sup> In the earlier typed manuscript (Box 42 Folder 546), the stanza appears as follows:  
"Every time I sees [*sic*] a human face/A million fears fill me./If I strike you it's because  
I'm scared you'll kill me."

Is this poem told from an American veteran who has returned home, but still traumatized by what he has experienced in the war against Hitler? Or is this a voice of a European soldier who fought on the Allies' side? Is he black or white? Just as in *The Outsider*, *The Savage Holiday*, and some of his haiku, Wright's blues-inspired poems at once treat racial themes while also *para-racially* exploring more or less general, non-racial issues such as the fear of alienation and death as well as the trauma of WWII.

As Werner Sollors has recently noted,<sup>224</sup> Wright in "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" predicted a potential disappearance of the "Negro":

As the Negro merges into the mainstream of American life, there might result actually a disappearance of Negro literature as such. If that happens, it will mean that those conditions of life that formerly defined what was "Negro" have ceased to exist . . . (772)

Like Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and George Schuyler, Wright here again emphasized that race was a product of one's socio-historical environment. To illustrate his point dramatically, he even suggested that the present audience could be turned "into Negroes in a psychological sense, in a period of six months" (772). In theory, Wright rejected the essential barrier between the races posited by William Faulkner when the white author declared that "a white man can only imagine himself for the moment a Negro; he cannot be that man of another race and griefs and problems" ("If I Were a Negro" 11), Wright argued that all one needed to do to "make you express yourselves as the American Negro formerly did" was to impose "certain restrictions, hatreds,

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<sup>224</sup> "Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro" (142).

hostilities" (772) for a certain period of time. But an important question still remained to be answered. If anybody could be a "Negro" in a purely psychological sense, and if any "Negro," in turn, could cease to be a "Negro," what and how would "Negro" authors write when they would no longer be "Negro" in the old sense of the term? Would a "cultural" change quickly follow a "psychological" one? Would a "Negro" author cease to be "Negro" in a "cultural" sense as well?

Having identified a correlation between the intensity of racism and the frequency with which racial themes appear in African American literature, Wright looked towards its future, and suggested two possible developments:

If the expression of American Negro should take a sharp turn toward strictly racial terms, then you will know by that token we are suffering our old and ancient agonies at the hands of our white American neighbors. If, however, our expression broadens, assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expression which are heritage of all men, then by that token you will know that a human attitude prevails in America towards us. And a gain in humanness in America is a gain in humanness for us all. When that day comes, there will exist one more proof of the oneness of man, of the basic unity of human life on earth. (773)

How would the "common themes and burdens of literary expression which are heritage of all men" be taken up by a "Negro" writer who would no longer be "Negro" in the old sense, that is, a man or a woman no longer constrained by race and racism? Here, Wright's thought foreshadowed or reflected a historical transition from the "Negro" to

“Afro-American” [and later to “African American”]. If the “Negro” vernacular cultural forms such as blues and jazz had already spoken not only to “Negroes” but also to audiences beyond race and the nation-state, Wright envisioned a future of “Afro-American/African American” literature *avant la lettre*, which would live up to its full transracial and transnational potentials. Wright’s blues-inspired poems, as well as his haiku, were clearly the prototypes of this newly expanded “un-Negro Negro literature,” that is, a transracial literature beyond Jim Crow, which would nevertheless be rooted in the historical experience and cultural heritage of African Americans.

In 1959, Wright wrote the “Preface” to Paul Oliver’s academic study of blues, *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960). This short text underscores the transcultural and transnational significance of the blues for the African American author in search for an expression beyond (or beside) naturalism and the depoliticized lyricism. It provides two important keys in understanding Wright’s efforts to expand the meaning and value of cultural expressions “rooted in” the African American experience “but not constrained by it,” to borrow Michael Eric Dyson’s formulation of post-Civil Rights notion of blackness.<sup>225</sup>

After enumerating standard themes of the blues, Wright explained a set of qualities that made this cultural tradition so powerful and moving:

[T]he most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force

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<sup>225</sup> “Tour(é)ing Blackness” in *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to be Black Now* xiii.

of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live.

All blues are a lusty, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibility. (ix-x)

This description of blues as “lyrical realism” of endurance perfectly fits Wright’s late blues-inspired poems as well. Although almost all of these poems in the last few months of his life sang of melancholy, broken-heart, pain and death, one can also read them, following Wright’s lead, as desperate affirmations of life.<sup>226</sup>

Just as significantly, Wright underscored Oliver’s specific contribution to the understanding of the blues from a transnational and transracial perspective:

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<sup>226</sup> More broadly speaking, Wright’s literature was from the beginning inseparable from what Houston Baker A., Jr. has called the “blues matrix.” In his review of Wright’s *Black Boy*, Ralph Ellison identified its formal similarity to Nehru’s *Toward Freedom*, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead*, which all took the Western form of memoir/autobiography. Ultimately, however, Ellison argued that Wright’s book owed more debt to the blues, which he brilliantly characterized in the following terms:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. . . . And like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, [Wright’s] lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound. (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 78-79).



This volume is the first history of those devil songs [the negative label results from a comparison with spirituals]; it tells how fortuitously they became to be preserved, how their influence spread magically among America's black population, and what their probably emotional and psychological meaning is. It would be very appropriate to recount that an American Negro was the first person to attempt a history of the blues and their meaning. But, like the blues themselves, this volume is paradoxical in its origin.<sup>227</sup> It was written neither by a Negro nor American nor a man who had ever seen America and her teeming Black Belts.

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<sup>227</sup> The blues is generally thought to have been "discovered" by W. C. Handy (1873-1958), the "Father of the Blues," while he was waiting for a train at Tutwiler in Mississippi in 1903. Trained in Western classical music, the African American musician recalled the historic moment when he encountered the blues in the famous passage in his autobiography: "A lean loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. . . . The effect was unforgettable. . . . The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard" (71). Although the blues has long been considered the "authentic" African American tradition ever since Handy's account of its "discovery," recent scholarship of the blues emphasizes the multicultural history of the tradition. These scholars argue that early blues developed through intimate interactions of African and Euro-American musical elements. For a concise summary of the critical history of the recent blues scholarship, see Kubik 12-20.

Paul Oliver . . . first heard the Negro's devil songs on phonograph records when he was a child living in London. Those songs haunted that English boy. They spoke to him and he was resolved to understand them. . . .

As a Southern-born American Negro, I can testify that Paul Oliver is drenched in his subject; his frame of reference is as accurate and concrete as though he himself had been born in the environment of the blues. *Can an alien, who has never visited the milieu from which a family of songs has sprung, write about them?* (x-xi; italics mine)

Juxtaposed with Wright's earlier remark that he could *psychologically* turn anyone into the "Negro" in six months, Wright's answer to the above question helps us understand how flexibly, or as he was fond of saying "dialectically," he conceived of the relationship between one's *cultural* identity and the socio-historical environment:

Indeed, I see certain psychological advantages in an outsider examining these songs and their meaning: his passionate interest in these songs is proof that the songs spoke to him across racial and cultural distances; he is geographically far enough from the broiling scene of America's racial strife to seize upon that which he, conditioned by British culture, feels to be abiding in them; and, in turn, whatever he finds enduring in those songs he can, and with easy conscience, relate to that in his culture which he feels to be humanly valid. In short, to the meaning of the blues, Paul Oliver brings, in the fullest human sense, what courts of law term "corroborative evidence." (xi)<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Wright confirmed the similarity of his and Oliver's projects in a letter to Margrit de

Rather than ignoring the national/racial identity of Oliver, Wright here saw the particular advantage of the white British scholar's position as an engaged outsider. Thanks to the long years of passionate research, Oliver in Wright's view had successfully travelled "across racial and cultural distances" and found in the blues enduring values that were "humanly valid."<sup>229</sup> Undoubtedly, the same can be said of Wright's interest in haiku. Although he had never been to Japan, the African American author intensely studied the Japanese poetic tradition and discovered in it enduring values beyond race and nation. Just as he saw the commonality between Bashō and Issa's landscape and his memories of the American South, Wright rejected parochially ethno-racial "authenticity" by celebrating Oliver's transcultural interest in the universal appeal of the blues, which could only be appreciated and "corroborated" through the particularity of one's lived experience.

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Sablionière, "It is a history of the blues. Paul Oliver wrote it and it is *very* good. It is an indictment of racial conditions in American shown through the Negro's songs, something a little in the line of my 'Literature of the Negro in the United States' ("March 19, 1960" qtd. in Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* 120; emphasis original).

<sup>229</sup> Wright was actually instrumental in later getting a funding for Oliver to travel to the United States for the first time to conduct fieldwork (Alan White, "Early Blues Interview: Paul Oliver, World Authority on the Blues").

VIII. Conclusion: “Could this melody/ Be sung in other countries/ By other birds?”

Changes as well as consistencies in the writings of Richard Wright, who considered himself an insider/outsider relative to the Western civilization, shed light on the complex interplay and tensions that exist between literary texts and their contexts.

Equally, Wright’s tumultuous journey dramatizes the complex relationship between the individual and the multiple locations of his/her belonging in the turbulent age of worldwide decolonization, which framed the larger structure of the Cold War. Because the global issues Wright sought to address affected many in the West and the non-West in the mid-twentieth century, the insight and blindness foregrounded by Wright’s late cosmopolitan writings—novels, haiku, blues-inspired poems, and cultural criticism—have a significance that extends far beyond the particular racial or national community with which he has long been identified. Haiku 563 eloquently formulates the question I have been exploring:

Could this melody

Be sung in other countries

By other birds?

Wright’s hybridizing transcoding of various cultural forms and themes (Russian, Anglo-American, African and African American, French, Spanish, German, and Japanese among others) helps us to think through the problematics of “authenticity.” One never knows how a cultural form might travel from its place of origin to different lands, where it may find unexpected audiences and new sources of energy to flourish

again. As numerous critics have already noted, cultural and racial “authenticity” might have been an empowering idea for the historically oppressed and marginalized in search for freedom, equality, and recognition<sup>230</sup>; the discourse of “authenticity,” however, has also created a stifling ghetto that fetishizes explicitly-denied but implicitly-posed cultural or biological purity that not only differentiates but also divides one group from another. If the problem of cultural or racial “authenticity” lies in its imperious policing of a group’s internal diversity that is thought to threaten its supposed coherence and homogeneity and of assuming insurmountable differences between that group and the rest of the world, Wright’s career has a lesson to teach us here. A vehement critic of Eurocentrism, he was also profoundly skeptical of anti-Western ethno-nationalisms. Wright’s reluctance or inability—or, perhaps both—to belong to any single imagined community (be it racial, ethnic, or national) dramatized contradictory processes of (liberating and constraining) identification and dis-identification conditioned in the age of world-wide decolonization. His was a world where, to borrow Lisa Lowe’s succinct formulation, “race [was] class-inflected, sexuality . . . racialized, and labor . . . gendered” (57). In other words, Wright lived in a world unequally and asymmetrically divided individual and peoples. Since the world that he tried to remake into his transnational and

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<sup>230</sup> For instance, see Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (1995); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond Race* (2000); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (2002).

transracial utopia is what we in the twenty-first century have inherited, the problems that he could not solve and the gaps that he could not fill still haunt us.

The central goal of this chapter was to understand what kind of political ideas, cultural traditions and personal desires were involved in the transcultural self-fashioning and literary creation of this globe-trotting intellectual, whose work has more often than not been regrettably seen within the narrow boundaries of his race and nationality. In this sense, it is not of little importance that Wright put side by side Countee Cullen's poignant recognition of African Americans' alienation from their ancestral home ("What is Africa to me?") and a passage from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as the epigrams of *Black Power*. While anxiously seeking to "wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering,"<sup>231</sup> he sometimes found himself increasingly deracinated from his roots. The first poem that begins *Haiku: This Other World* poignantly attests to this afflicted sense of being alone in the world:

I am nobody:  
A red sinking autumn sun  
Took my name away.

At the same time, while performing multiple and situational identities (be it racial, political, or cultural), he sought to create a globally inclusive self with more openness to alterity and difference than many of his critics have claimed in the past. In the aforementioned letter to Nkrumah at the end of *Black Power*, Wright, the perpetual seeker for meaning, emphasized the necessity of turning "suffering" into a meaningful

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<sup>231</sup> *Black Boy* 100.

struggle against oppression: “There will be no way to avoid a degree of suffering, of trial, of tribulation; suffering comes to all people, but you have within your power the means to make the suffering of your people meaningful, to redeem whatever stresses and strains may come” (419). The letter, addressed to the people of the Gold Coast as it was, expressed his wish for every human being in the world. In retrospect, his life was characterized by a dogged desire to recognize commonalities beyond race and nation and to embrace an undying hope for redemption, rather than cynically giving up his dream of freedom and intercultural understanding in the face of the apparently incommensurable differences of race, nation, culture. Through Richard Wright’s life and writing across and beyond the color-lines and the national borders, one hears an echo of Whitman as he sang, “Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you.”<sup>232</sup>

Perhaps we will never know fully how Wright’s many lives were lived “amidst the confusion and stagnation” (633) of the mid-twentieth century. Be that as it may, he was never simply a tragically lonely exile, with no culture or community to claim his own—even if he sometimes felt like such an outsider himself in moments of self-doubt and desperation. In an era of globalization, as we suffer from its flaws as well as enjoy its benefits, literary critics need to adopt fundamentally transnational and transracial perspectives, and in doing so reclaim Richard Wright as one of the pioneering

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<sup>232</sup> Whitman qtd. in Wright, *Black Power* 7. This was apparently his favorite poem for a long time. During an interview in 1945, he recited the passage off the top of his head to explain the motive behind writing *Twelve Million Voices*. He stated, “I wanted to lend, give my tongue, to voiceless Negro boys” (65).

transcultural cosmopolitans who lived and wrote as a seeker for a home, not just for himself, but “for the hearts of all.”



## Chapter 3

The Globe-Fish and the Watermelon: Amiri Baraka's Journey from a "Pre-Black"

Bohemian Outsider to a "Post-American Low Coup" Poet

*We want a post-American form. An afterwhiteness color to live and re-erect the strength of the primitive.*

LeRoi Jones, "What the Arts Need Now," 1967.

### I. The Taste of a Globe-Fish: Avant-Garde Poetics and Ambivalent Figures of Asia in the Early Texts of Amiri Baraka

This chapter will continue to demonstrate the diversity of African American literature as it has flourished "beyond black and white"—or rather, "beside" such a dichotomy—through an examination of the haiku and haiku-inspired poems written by African Americans in the post-WWII period. Among others, I will focus on the life and works of Amiri Baraka, a major if polarizing poet/playwright whose relationship to Asia and Asian cultural traditions has been ruefully neglected by most scholars of African American literature and by the general reading public. This chapter explores where, why, and how Baraka developed such a keen interest in Asia while reexamining the crucial role that Asia played in the avant-garde circles in the United States during the late 50s and the early 60s.

In the third volume of their little magazine *Yūgen, a new consciousness in arts and letters* (1958),<sup>233</sup> the editors LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Hettie Cohen, used an Edo-era Japanese poem by Taibai (1772-1841) as an epigraph: “To a man who has not eaten/A globe-fish, /We cannot speak of its flavour” (1).<sup>234</sup> Given the interracial couple’s daring, border-crossing, cosmopolitan editorial policy, the poem about the fish known for its heavenly taste as well as for its deadly poison could not have been more appropriate.<sup>235</sup>

Baraka, though, could not have fully anticipated the implication of citing the poem in his magazine: the fascinating parallel that would emerge between a series of protean transformations he was about to go through and the dramatic self-refashioning of the nineteenth-century Japanese poet. In his time, Taibai, whose real name was Kojima Baigai, was considered one of the four greatest masters of Chinese poetry. To everyone’s surprise, however, he suddenly gave up his illustrious career in around 1811 to take up haiku. In response to those who urged him to return to writing Chinese poetry,

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<sup>233</sup> Baraka and Cohen managed to publish eight issues of the magazine from 1958 to 62.

<sup>234</sup> “ふぐくはぬ人にはいはじ鰐の味” (qtd. in Blyth, *Zen in Literature* 69). The poet’s name is more often than not pronounced as “Daibai” in English, but I will follow R. H. Blyth’s style for the sake of consistency. For a short biography of Taibai in English, see Hoffman.

<sup>235</sup> As Ibi Takashi has pointed out, globe-fish/ swell-fish were eaten by the common folks in the eighteenth century and were not considered the luxury it has become today (*Taibai ron: Shi kara haikai e*. [On Taibai: From Poetry to Haikai] 12). A blowfish was a fairly common subject for haiku. Blyth quotes some examples such as “Waking up, —/ I am still alive,/ After eating swell-fish soup! (Yosa Buson qtd. in Blyth 957).

Baigai, now calling himself “Taibai,” wrote the aforementioned self-reflexive haiku, in which the globefish served as a metaphor of haiku.

Just as Baigai became Taibai, the haiku poet, Baraka was going to transform himself from a racially ambiguous bohemian in the late 50s to a fiery black nationalist in the mid-60s, and then to a Third-World Marxist (with Lenin and Mao Tse-tung being his heaviest influence) in the mid-70s.<sup>236</sup> Nearly two decades later, he was also going to experiment with the haiku form and become what he would call a “low coup” poet.

As Ibi Takashi has perceptively pointed out, there are many subtle but recognizable traces of Chinese poetic conventions in numerous haiku by Taibai (10-13). It is tempting to see his style’s continuity-in-transformation in terms provided by Baraka’s subsequent theory of the “changing same,” a concept he used to describe the unity of African American music in the fluctuating process of its historical evolution (*Blues People* 153).

Though the affinity I am suggesting between Jones/Baraka and Baigai/Taibai may be speculative at best, that the young black bohemian was avidly interested in things Oriental is indisputable. The adoption of a key Zen term, *yūgen*, for the title of his and Cohen’s little magazine, the use of Taibai’s haiku as an epigraph, in addition to the couple’s wedding in a Buddhist temple,<sup>237</sup> all speak amply for young Baraka’s fascination with the cultures of the East.

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<sup>236</sup> For a helpful and more detailed periodization of Baraka’s early career, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones* 7-8.

<sup>237</sup> In their attempt to find an alternative to an African American or Jewish ceremony,

In his *Autobiography* of 1984 and a short essay, “‘Howl’ and Hail,” written in 2006, Baraka recalls his first encounter with Buddhist thought at a library on Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico. Right after dropping out of college, he had joined the air force in 1954. During his military service, he used his free time on the base for intensive literary training, describing these years, in a clear allusion to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, as “my graduate school or . . . undergraduate school” (*Autobiography* 163). He would spend the “nights and 12 hrs every day under the Latino sun” (“‘Howl’ and Hail” 8), voraciously reading classics as well popular titles:

Proust and *Auntie Mame* [Patrick Dennis’s best-seller in 1955]. Hemingway and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* [another best-seller of 1955, by Sloan Wilson]. And Joyce, Faulkner, Melville, Dostoyevsky, Hesse, Flaubert, Cummings, Lawrence, Pound, Patchen, Hardy, James, Balzac, Stendhal. I would read *Bonjour Tristesse* [by Francoise Sagan] and Robert Graves in the same day. (*Autobiography* 165)

Baraka did not appreciate the English classics so much—he calls them “some under the earth dull shit” (“‘Howl’ and Hail” 8). It was mainly the modernists and the French symbolists that had strong appeals for him: Joyce, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire in particular. As Baraka characterized the period later, he and a few kindred spirits on the base in the Caribbean “were getting our under and over graduate readiness preparation to return to Civilization. . . after roaming the sky scaring the world with nuclear

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Baraka and Cohen got married at a Buddhist temple on New York’s Upper West Side. See Baraka, *Autobiography* 216.

frustration [he was being trained as a gunner], American ignorance, and young arrogance, wondering what the big world [would] be” (8). This youthful longing for the world unseen and untraveled, added to the bohemian cultural weariness at “Civilization” (read “Western”), provided important contexts for his unexpected encounter with “a book on Buddhism and *The Communist Manifesto*. . . in the same afternoon” (*Autobiography* 156).

Once Baraka was exposed to Buddhism in Puerto Rico, his appetite was whetted. During the Christmas leave of 1956, he visited his friend from high school, Allen Polite (1932-93), in the Village.<sup>238</sup> Having recently become a Buddhist, Polite served as Baraka’s guide further into the spiritual world of the East:

It was still the middle ’50s (’56) and the tremendous popularity of the East in bohemian circles had not yet reached its full peak. [Polite] was an early acolyte. He even worked in an Eastern bookshop called Orientalia, around 12th Street. I came to the bookstore before I went back to Puerto Rico and I was transported by the hundreds of scholarly books on various schools of Buddhism and Eastern thought in general. I bought two of R. H. Blythe’s

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<sup>238</sup> Baraka fictionalized some of the names that appear in his autobiography. Polite is therefore referred to as “Steve Korret.” Baraka often used pun in renaming his friends, as in Polite-Correct-Korret. Similarly, he refers to *Yūgen* as *Zazen*, *The Partisan Review* as *The Sectarian Review*. In a later interview, he has explained the reason behind the name changes, stating that he needed to create some psychological distance from the people he was writing about and that there was no intention of hiding the characters’ real identities, for they were fairly obvious. See Reilly, “An Interview” 239-40. I will later discuss the significance of pun in the Barakian poetics.

[sic.] books on Zen, analyzing Western art for parallels with Zen consciousness. I was swept up. (169)

Judging from the date and the content, Blyth's books Baraka mentions here must have been *Zen in English Literature* (1946) and one of the four volumes of *Haiku* (1949-52), a tremendously influential introduction in English to the world of classic haiku, which, as I have shown in the previous chapter, the British expatriate prepared while he was interned in Japan as an enemy alien during WWII.<sup>239</sup> That Baraka identifies Blyth as one of his main sources of information about Zen and haiku is vital. It turns out that three years before Richard Wright began reading Blyth's *Haiku*—in Wright's case all of the four volumes—and produced over 4,000 haiku of his own as his swan songs in Paris in 1960, Blyth's books had also mesmerized Baraka.

Among the Beat circle, of which Baraka was a vital part, interests in the Imagist works of Ezra Pound earlier in the century were often combined with this fascination with Asia, specifically stoked by Blyth's interpretation of Zen and haiku. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, were it not for the South African Beat poet, Sinclair Beiles, who lent Blyth's books to Wright in Paris, the African American writer would most likely not have developed his interest in haiku.

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<sup>239</sup> In *Zen in English Literature*, Blyth even attaches a helpful note to his translation of Taibai's haiku for the non-Japanese readers who had most likely never heard of a globe-fish, let alone had a taste of one (69). In *Haiku*, Blyth also explains the cultural value of the figure when discussing some haiku on the subject: "The swell-fish, or globe-fish is very poisonous, but as people think it delicious, they often eat it at the risk of their lives" (958).

In thinking about Baraka and Wright in connection to Blyth, one should also recall, as Eugene E. Miller has pointed out, that Blyth cites one of Langston Hughes's dialect poem, "Home Sick Blues"—"The railroad bridge/ Is a sad song/ In de air"—as one of the numerous expressions of Zen-like sensibility in the West.<sup>240</sup> This was certainly an interesting selection that the two African American authors would have appreciated, but neither Wright nor Baraka mentions having noticed the poem.<sup>241</sup> In any case, that the two of the most important African American authors in the twentieth century read the same books on Zen and haiku, but were inspired in different ways, attests to the diversity of the African American imaginings about Asia.

As a matter of fact, even within Baraka's early references to Asia, one finds heterogeneity and even contradictions.<sup>242</sup> Many of these were little more than superficial rhetorical gimmicks that emphasized exoticism and primitivism, which might lead us to conclude that Asia—whether he engaged with it through Buddhism, haiku, or classic Chinese poetry—never had the deeply transformative effect on Baraka

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<sup>240</sup> Miller, *Voices of a Native Son* 245.

<sup>241</sup> Hughes's poem is cited without attribution in the body of the book (*Haiku* 1: 306), but Blyth provides the title and the author in the appendix. As I have noted in the previous chapter, Blyth slightly changes the words in the poem. See n. 203.

<sup>242</sup> In fact, Baraka scatters various signs, imageries, or epithets, related to the East not only in his early writings but also in his stream of consciousness. When he was kicked out of the Air Force in 1957 after an anonymous letter accused him of being a Communist, he apparently thought to himself in protest, "No shit! . . . I . . . thought I was an aspiring Buddhist" (*Autobiography* 173).

as haiku did on Wright in the late 1950s.<sup>243</sup> Nevertheless, there are a few instances that require special attention. In some of the poems that I shall examine, Baraka significantly inflects stereotypical images about Asia and the people of Asian descent with the poignant recognition of his own racial difference within United States. In other words, reflecting and complicating Baraka's own perceived sense of marginality in his native land, Baraka's early poetic evocations of Asia symptomatically revealed the deep psychological conflicts about his own racial and national identity.

Baraka, though, does not publicly give such a loaded symbolic value to Asia in his reminiscences about the past. It is remarkable that when he famously renounced his earlier black bohemian self in 1969, he subtly but completely erased his earlier fascination with Asia from his memory:

You notice the preoccupation with death, suicide, in the early works. . . . The work [was] a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness, that was just whiteness.

European influence, etc., just as the concept of hopelessness and despair, from the dead minds the dying morality of Europe (*Black Magic* 2).

Everything negative is associated here with "Europe" and "whiteness," and is rejected.

While reading this passage, one cannot help but wonder what has happened to Asia,

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<sup>243</sup> No doubt, much stronger was the influence of French symbolists, Federico García Lorca (more on him later), Anglo-American high modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as American vernacular modernists such as William Carlos Williams and E. E. Cummings. For a fuller list of probable literary influences, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka* 1-2.



Buddhism, and Zen, which had so preoccupied Baraka from the mid-50s to the early 60s.

In the aforementioned *Autobiography* over a quarter of a century later, Baraka, by then a revolutionary Marxist, remembers his bohemian period with a subtle but significant difference. Like the earlier account, his autobiography also recalls these years in negative terms, but this time Baraka does not suppress his earlier fascination with Asia. In fact, he recognizes such an interest when he ambivalently revises this period as an admittedly confused but necessary stage in his intellectual apprenticeship. Looking back at his intellectual evolution towards his later cosmopolitanism, he now describes the Asian influence on his earlier thought in the following manner:

Finally, I am an internationalist and it is clear to me now that all people have contributed to the wealth of common world culture — and I thought that then, if only on the surface! But I had given myself, in my quest for intellectualism, a steady diet of European thought, though altered somewhat by the Eastern Buddhist reading. (174)

Given the obvious discrepancy between the two accounts, one is compelled to ask which recollection is more accurate. Did the Eastern Buddhist reading have no effect on him at all, as he recalled in 1969? Or did it “alter somewhat” his predominantly European intellectualism at the time, as he stated in 1984?

Juxtaposing Baraka’s sporadic and equivocal references to Eastern art and thought in the latter account of the mid-50s to the early 60s with his early work as an editor and a poet, I argue that Asia in fact had a much more significant if ambivalent influence on

him than he recognizes in either account. In my view, Baraka does not adequately explain the actual nature of his early engagement with Asia, which is suggested by his remark that he was “swept up” by Blyth’s books on Buddhism and haiku, and more clearly confirmed in his dual role as the co-editor and contributor of *Yūgen*.

Baraka’s interests in Asia during his bohemian period was clearly more important than he later gives it credit for, not only for his development as a poet but also for the diverse community of readers he was addressing as its vital mediator. As a co-editor and a contributing poet of *Yūgen*, Baraka undoubtedly played an instrumental role in sustaining what he called the “tremendous popularity of the East in bohemian circles.”

To demonstrate the significance of his early engagement with the Asian cultural traditions such as Zen, haiku and Chinese poetry, let us first look at Baraka’s editorial work in this period and then examine his own poetry, noticing how he uses assorted images of Asia and of the people of Asian descent. The title of his and Cohen’s little magazine, *Yūgen*, is a good place to start. The term refers to a Zen ideal. According to their own definition, it means “elegance, beauty, grace, transcendence of these things, and also nothing at all” (1:1). The elusiveness and expansiveness of the term was just perfect for the main title of their brand-new little magazine, which was conceived as a venture to renew Pound’s by-then old slogan, “Make it new.”<sup>244</sup> Their quarterly magazine, just as the editors hoped, was to become a significant site for avant-garde poetic experimentation, where the past and the present, the East Coast and the West

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<sup>244</sup> Hettie Jones’s autobiography, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, provides significant details behind the running of the small magazine.

Coast, as well as the East and the West, converged.

In their influential study of African American magazines in the twentieth century, Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson have inaccurately downplayed the multiracial dimension of the cultural politics of *Yūgen* when they emphasized “the generally nonracial tone of the poems, stories, and essays” (158). Their assessment of the “general” tendency of the magazine as integrationist, which in their view encouraged cooperation only between black and white writers in racially neutral terms, overlooks the significant presence of Asia, as well as the distinct racial politics of Baraka’s cultural work.

A more recent and balanced article by Ian Patterson calls the little magazine “a landmark . . . which helped establish the common ground for writers from disparate backgrounds and tradition” (999). Otherwise well-balanced and informative, Patterson’s description also fails to see the true significance of frequent evocations of Asia, as he reduces the “discernible Beat/Zen influence” (997) to Rachel Spitzer’s calligraphy (998) and the magazine’s title, which he nevertheless quickly dismisses as not really matching the magazine’s content (997). Patterson’s summary of how the little magazine was run—“Jazz poets, Beats, students, men and women, black and white, all the contributors brought something to the mix” (999)—similarly gives a misleading impression that little of Asia (or Asian America) was in the “mix.” Again, this is a gross misrepresentation of the significance of Asia’s influence on the magazine, which was clear from the very beginning.

The first issue of *Yūgen*, for which 500 copies were printed,<sup>245</sup> contained two of Baraka's poems, in addition to works by Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen,<sup>246</sup> Diane Di Prima, and many lesser-known poets. Among these, two African American poets require special attention. The first is Allen Polite, Baraka's aforementioned friend in the Village. As a matter of fact, Polite was much more than a "friend" to Baraka. As Baraka's *Autobiography* reiterates (the name Polite/Korret appears at least 60 times in a 465-page book), Polite was indeed a formative influence on Baraka as a man and a poet since their high-school days. To begin with, he was the first to call Baraka a "poet" (176). Baraka also recalls imbibing the Village life "through his spiritual stewardship" (184). He even goes so far as to acknowledge that "I was meeting people or seeing them in one way or another through [Polite]. He was my center, and his circle the pinnacle of my social and intellectual aspirations" (185).

As has been noted, Polite worked at Orientalia,<sup>247</sup> the bookstore that not only the Beats like Baraka but also Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and many other avant-garde artists, musicians, and performers frequented.<sup>248</sup> Had it not been for Baraka's social and intellectual admiration for Polite, with his keen interest in the Eastern intellectual and

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<sup>245</sup> Patterson 998.

<sup>246</sup> It is worth noting that Whalen would eventually become a Zen monk in the 70s.

<sup>247</sup> Concerning the capacity in which Polite worked at the bookstore, there are conflicting accounts. According to Baraka's 1984 *Autobiography*, he was just a "worker" there (169; 185), but Dunlap identifies his position as "part-owner."

<sup>248</sup> There is even a deeper connection between Polite and Asia. During the Korean War, he was stationed in Korea as well as in Japan from 1952 to 53. Whether this experience directly affected his later writings is yet to be ascertained.

artistic traditions, it may well have been that Baraka would never have gotten so deeply interested in Asia in the first place. Baraka himself suggests as much in his *Autobiography*:

[Polite] worked in a bookstore, Orientalia, along with . . . Nicky Czernovitch, whom I had now got to know going in and out of Orientalia, staring in awe at the thousands of titles relating to Eastern thought. Zen had come in even then [1957] with some groups of Village intellectuals. It was the so-called Beat Generation people who later popularized this attention to Eastern philosophy, especially Zen. But [Polite], Czernovitch, Cage, Cunningham, Renny Charlip, and their circles were intimately involved with the philosophy even then. And because of [Polite], so was I. (185)

Although Polite's literary contributions to the first issue of *Yūgen*, "Beg Him to Help" and "Touching Air," do not bear any discernable sign of his known interest in Asia, his active role in the intimate circle of avant-garde Zen aficionados in and of itself should receive more critical recognition.<sup>249</sup> At the very least, the role he played in stirring the

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<sup>249</sup> Polite's other poems were published in *Sixes and Sevens, An Anthology of New Poetry* (1962) and Langston Hughes's *New Negro Poets, U.S.A.* (1964). Polite is perhaps forgotten partly due to the fact that he, like Richard Wright, left the U.S. permanently for Europe in the early 60s. (Baraka refers to the departure in his *Autobiography* 185-86, 190). He eventually settled in Sweden, where he stayed till he passed away in 1993. Even in his self-imposed exile, he kept writing poetry till the very end of his life. However, MLA International Bibliography lists no articles on his poems. A group of scholars is now working to resurrect his legacy from oblivion. In addition to Dunlap, see the Allen Polite Papers, which are now kept in the Archives & Special

passion for the knowledge of Eastern cultures among his African American and white friends compels us to expand the scope of African American cultural history from the mid- to the late 50s, which is still generally understood only in terms of “black” and “white.” Similarly, Polite’s critically neglected role in the Village as a significant mediator of the disparate groups of artists and intellectuals encourages us to revise the history of American avant-gardism in the post-WWII era, which tends to ignore or marginalize African Americans’ contribution.

The other noteworthy African American poet featured in the first issue is Ed James, who is introduced as an M.A. student in philosophy at the New School (*Yūgen* 1:24). James submitted two untitled poems, one of which captures nature in an Imagistic style, “Hawks will cry/ slow concentric circles/ where the willows of march brood/ naked loneliness,/ meadowlark,/ walk quietly” (7). As a matter of fact, Baraka in his *Autobiography* recalls James as deeply absorbed in haiku and *tanka* (195). Like Polite, however, James appears only in this issue.<sup>250</sup>

The second issue of *Yūgen*, which followed a few months later, featured poems more clearly influenced by Asia: “4 Haiku” by Tuli Kupferberg (7) and Gary Snyder’s “Chion-in” (20) are the case in point. The latter was an Imagistic poem about a famous temple in Kyoto. As we shall see, Snyder would continue to contribute many more

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Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. Its web page provides a short but useful biography.

<sup>250</sup> Like Polite, James has been critically forgotten. Neither the MLA International Bibliography nor the *Oxford African American Research Center* contains any article on him.

poems to the magazine while shuttling back and forth between Kyoto and California. To be sure, in this and later issues, there were also many texts that had little or nothing to do with Asia, such as Ron Loewisohn's "The Trucks." However, to characterize this little magazine and Baraka's early poetry only in terms of black and white, or in non-racial terms, as much of criticism in the past has done, is to miss its fundamentally transcultural aspirations.<sup>251</sup>

The third issue, also published in 1958, contained the Taibai poem cited earlier. To this volume, Snyder contributed two more poems. The first was "Praise for Sick Women," a primitivist work on the theme of menstruation with an allusion to the Hindi Goddess Shakti.<sup>252</sup> The second was "another for the same," which contained a Chinese character, though only for a decorative effect, à la Pound, and a reference to a famous Japanese beauty: "A cut reed floating,/ A sort of lady Komachi;/ Wiser than me/ The best of your beauty/ Always hidden, yū 幽" (4).<sup>253</sup>

Also appearing in the third issue was "Now When I Hear" by C. Jack Stamm, whom Baraka and Cohen introduced as "someone who does a lot of translating from the

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<sup>251</sup> A notable exception is Werner Sollors's *Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones*, to which this chapter is heavily indebted.

<sup>252</sup> Helen Vendler, accurately, reads this primitivist poem as one of the "failed attempts to speak with a tribal voice" among Snyder's more successful treatments of the relationship between human and nature" (*Soul Says* 122). This poem was nevertheless later reprinted in Donald Allen's epoch-making *The New American Poetry* (1960).

<sup>253</sup> For an extended reading of this poem, see Joan Qionglin Tan, *Han Shan, Chan Buddhism and Gary Snyder's Ecopoetic Way* 207. As is well known, Kerouac in *The Dharma Bum* (1958) modeled the character "Japhy Ryder" on Snyder (Vendler 119).

Japanese (24). Stamm used a Japanese imagery to parody Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem, "The Raven" (1845): "When I hear the flying of a crane, / Know the no more, no more, of falling leaves" (7). Stamm would later translate Tawara Machi's best-selling book of contemporary *tanka*, *Salad Anniversary* in 1988 (originally published in Japan in 1987). In addition, Robin Blaser, who, along with Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, would play a central role in the Berkeley Poetry Renaissance, published "Quitting a Job." As the title suggests, the speaker quits his job one day, longing to get away from the "hot Boston summer," and ends up imaginatively teleporting himself to the Tang-Dynasty China, with the help of the Great Chinese poet, Tu Fu [Du Fu]: "I think of Tu Fu's rabbit pounding bitter herbs. The seeding grass. And yes, this blue (O, inward) mountain" (22-23).

The fourth issue was epoch-making in the history of contemporary American poetry, for it brought together the diverse groups of innovative poets from around the country for the first time: the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson and Robert Creeley); the Beats (Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, and Ginsberg); and the New York School poet, Frank O'Hara.<sup>254</sup> Kerouac this time submitted four haiku along with two blues poems (18-19). Baraka's multiracial poem, "Parthenos," also appears in this issue as well. Before examining this crucial work, let us first finish reviewing the four remaining issues of *Yūgen*.

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<sup>254</sup> As James Smethurst has recently argued in *The Black Arts Movement*, Baraka should take more credit for bringing these different schools of avant-garde poetry together (39).



There are only a few references to Asia in the fifth issue, but it is notable that William Carlos Williams's short poem, "A Formal Design" (2), was printed here. Reminiscent of the three-line series in *Paterson* (1946), William's poem does not seem to owe anything specifically to Asia. As Zhaoming Qian has compellingly shown, however, Pound's experiments with Asian poetic traditions and his creative use of Ernest Fenollosa's notes in *Cathay* (1915) in particular deeply affected Williams's poetry in the 1910s and 20s.<sup>255</sup> As Qian has reminded us, "Prologue to *Kora in Hell*," written in 1918, alludes to Li Bo and Yang Guifei (719-56), a legendary concubine of the Emperor, Ming Huang.<sup>256</sup> Williams also wrote "To the Shade of Po Chü-i [Bo Juyi], a recently rediscovered short lyric on the Tang Chinese poet (772-846), who had also immortalized Guifei in his *Chang hen ge* [The Everlasting Wrong].<sup>257</sup>

According to Qian, Williams's early interests in Asian art and literature were rekindled in the late 1950s. At the time, the aging modernist began to engage himself in an intimate creative collaboration with a young Chinese American poet, David Raphael Wang, to translate, or rather creatively adapt, the Chinese classics of Li Po, Wang Wei, and Du Fu.<sup>258</sup> In other words, William wrote "A Formal Design" and sent it to Baraka

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<sup>255</sup> Fenollosa was of course the art historian who played a central role in the popularization of Japanese art and Chinese poetry in the West in the late nineteenth century. For more on Williams's interest in Asia, see Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism* 113-65.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid. 120.

<sup>257</sup> Williams, *The Collected* 1: 133. For more on the poem, see Qian

<sup>258</sup> Their joint venture was soon to culminate in "The Cassia Tree" (1966), which was published three years after Williams passed away in New Jersey. For more details on

when he was immersing himself in the world of classic Chinese poetry. As it happens, Wang, his collaborator in the ambitious project, submitted “II. Invocations,” a short poem based loosely on his translation of classic Chinese poetry, to the 6th issue of *Yūgen*.

The seventh issue of *Yūgen* contains no explicit reference to Asia, but the eighth issue cites a Zen monk, Tokusan: “Whether you speak or do not speak, thirty blows of my stick just the same” (3). This quotation confirms the editors’ continuing interest in the Eastern thought till the very end of the magazine in 1962. Moreover, Tokusan’s seemingly “profound,” but in fact ridiculous declaration, based as it is on a self-serving logic (i.e. “heads I win, tails you lose”), helps clarify an important aspect of their fascination with Zen: a source of amusing jokes.

As a matter of fact, such sense of humor may have indeed been the primary reason why the young, morose bohemian Baraka was drawn to Zen. His autobiography notes the association between Zen and humor among the bohemian circles in the mid-1950s:

The most obvious facet of the Zen trend in the Village in those days was the presence of the Zen “jokes.” People in that circle would make ironic

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the Williams-Wang collaboration, see Qian, “William Carolos Williams, David Raphael Wang, and the Dynamic of East/West Collaboration.” “The Cassia Tree” is reprinted in Williams, *The Collected Poems* 359-76. Although Qian overlooks this crucial fact, Williams in his last years was also reading (or re-reading?) Japanese poetry. For his more or less ambivalent references about his poetic debts to Japan, see “The Sparrow” (1959) and “The World Contracted to a Recognizable Image” (*The Collected Poems* 291-95; 415-16).

statements, funny or with pretensions of being funny, that were supposed to reveal some basic Zen truth or insight. I guess this came because in the various books about Zen, especially those of Blythe [*sic.*], Alan Watts and Suzuki, humor was supposed to be an intrinsic part of the doctrine. And many times individuals were supposed to have gained “enlightenment” through laughter. In fact, the Zen masters and monks and other initiates were always supposed to be “roaring with laughter” in revelation of one Zen truth or another. (185)

It is significant that roaring with laughter is recognized here as an important way of gaining enlightenment. Deeply influenced by the blues aesthetic, which I have shown in the previous chapters as having at its core a similar sense of resilient humor (i.e. “laughing to keep from crying”), Baraka here seems to identify Zen as having a close affinity with the African American vernacular tradition, the dozens. To hazard a pun, this identification of Zen and the dozens, which I will discuss more in detail later, takes on a crucial meaning when Baraka begins to adapt haiku in the late 1990s.

It should be noted at this point that Baraka and Cohen were clearly more interested in expanding their avant-garde poetics than in promoting minority poets. In this sense, they were unlike Ishmael Reed, who tirelessly encouraged and supported Asian American writers in the mid-1970s.<sup>259</sup> Indeed, as Baraka himself acknowledged, white

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<sup>259</sup> For Reed’s endorsement of Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Jeffery Paul Chang, see Higashida, “Not Just a ‘Special Issue’: Gender, Sexuality, and Post-1965 Afro Asian Coalition Building in the *Yardbird Reader* and *This Bridge*

contributors came to dominate the magazine after the very first issue. The few exceptions, apart from Polite, James, Wang and Baraka himself, were Mason Jordan Mason and Steve Jonas. Mason's rebellious and ribald poems, which appeared in the third and fourth issues, prefigure the militancy of the Black Power, but let us focus on Jonas's work, for it is more significant for the current discussion.

Jonas was of a (contested) mixed race origin. His admiration for Pound sometimes replicated not only the earlier poet's fascination with the cultures of the East, but also his anti-Semitism.<sup>260</sup> In his autobiography, Baraka recalls Jonas as "a crazy half-black (maybe Cape Verdian)" poet who "rambled nonstop about Pound. Blacks and Jews and Poundians all, scrambled by talk of Art. We'd look at all the 'kikes' and 'niggers' in his work, gloss it, look over it, justify it, and right on, Pound, right on!" (237-38).

In the eighth and last issue of *Yūgen* appeared Jonas's "No. IV Orgasms." His encyclopedic cataloguing technique was wilder and his poetic posture more provocative than, say, the similarly encyclopedic but more high-brow style of Melvin Tolson (*Dark Symphony*). Jonas's pyrotechnic explosion of a poem recognizes the "defects inherent in all art-forms" (16), but boldly expresses his determination to create his own poetics by, as it were, any means necessarily. While declaring his future artistic independence ("dont look back"), Jonas pays his homage to the two of his spiritual ancestors:

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*Called My Back.*"

<sup>260</sup> See Nielsen, *Integral Music* 64; Smethurst, in *The Black Arts Movement*, describes Jonas as having "personified the committed new-style avant-gardist in both his work and life as an arch-bohemian in Boston as well as in California through his contact with Jack Spicer and the circle of West Coast poets and artists that surrounded Spicer" (39).

Cimabue, the thirteenth-century Florentine painter who decisively broke away from the earlier Byzantine style, and Okakura Kakuzo [Tenshin] (1862-1913), the famous author of *The Book of Tea* (1906), who became the first Asian chief curator of the Chinese and Japanese Division at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.<sup>261</sup> Jonas's obsession with Pound, if not with the Eastern aesthetics per se, is also clearly seen in his "Subway Haiku" (1967), which appeared in *The Floating Bear*, another little magazine edited by Baraka, together with Diane Di Prima.<sup>262</sup> Needless to say, this poem was clearly an allusion to Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), the most famous Imagist poem of all time.

As the co-editor of *Yūgen*, Baraka thus provided an important forum for poets of various schools to engage with Asia in the late 50s and early 60s. It should come as no surprise then that the work of Baraka the poet also showed significant interest in Asia.

As he himself has later noted, the Baraka of the late 50s was an alienated bohemian Beat poet, who aesthetically expressed his confusion, loneliness, and death wish, under

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<sup>261</sup> Okakura was a disciple of Fenollosa, who, as previously mentioned, was instrumental in promoting Japanese art and Chinese poetry to the West in the late nineteenth century. Pound posthumously edited and published Fenollosa's notes, which had a crucial impact on his *Cantos*. For more on Pound's relationship to the legacies of Fenollosa, see Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism*; Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* Huang; and Rupert R. Arrowsmith, "The Transcultural Roots of Modernism: Imagist Poetry, Japanese Visual Culture, and the Western Museum System."

<sup>262</sup> More on this poem, see Nielsen, *Integral Music*, 72; *Black Chant* 22.

the heavy influence of T. S. Eliot and the French symbolists. His archenemy was the dull and suffocating conformity of the black bourgeoisie, which, in his view, conservatively aspired to “white” respectability. As Jerry Watts has compellingly shown, the great irony of Baraka’s anti-bourgeois stance was that he firmly belonged to the very social class he rhetorically despised. According to Watts, this fact made it all the more urgent for Baraka to create the clear and visible distance from the black bourgeoisie through his bohemian life style. “Vice,” a poem from his first collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (1961), memorably articulates this contradiction as a “mosaic of disorder I own but cannot recognize. Mist in me” (29).

How do Asia, Asians, and Asian Americans figure in this mosaic of disorder? Let’s begin with “Lines to García Lorca,” which appeared in the first issue of *Yūgen*. Lorca had been enormously popular among African Americans since his visit to the United States in 1929. While attending a short program at Columbia, he frequented Harlem. There, he heard African American spirituals and expressed his profound admiration for them. Because of his demonstrated solidarity with African Americans, Lorca influenced various African American authors such as Richard Wright, Audre Lorde, Robert Kaufman, A. B. Spellman, and Steve Jonas.<sup>263</sup> As if to reinforce this historical connection or “lines” to the murdered Spanish freedom fighter, Baraka’s poem quotes a “Negro spiritual” as an epigraph—“If I’m gonna see you agin,/ It’ll be on the judgment

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<sup>263</sup> For more on Lorca’s identification with African Americans, see Hess, “From Buster Keaton to the King of Harlem Musical Ideologies in Lorca’s ‘Poeta en Nueva York’” 112; for Baraka’s own account of the debt to Lorca, see Mackey 289-90, n. 21.

day” (17).

In his imaginary postmortem communion with Lorca, the poem’s speaker emulates the Lorcaesque imagery. In a surreal and primitivist description of his own dwelling place, one finds the first reference to Asia between the covers of *Yūgen*: “Mandolins grow on the highslopes/orange robed monks collect song” (17). In Baraka’s imaginary Orient, Buddhist monks in orange robes are idealized as hard-working preservers of the vernacular songs, sung for/by the heroes of the people, like Lorca (and, by his obvious identification with the poet, Baraka himself).<sup>264</sup>

Similarly, there is a sudden evocation, expressed in the African American vernacular, of an Indian independence leader (along with Lincoln) and of Zen in a protest against racial discrimination in the section 6 of “Hymn for Lanie Poo,”<sup>265</sup> which was collected in *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note*.<sup>266</sup> “I think they [white Americans] are not treating us [black Americans] like/ Mr. Lincun said they should/ or Mr. Gandhi./ For that matter. By God./ Zen/ is a bitch!” (11). In yet another early poem, “In Memory of Radio,” the speaker compares himself with Hitler and the Californian governor at the time, and feels disappointed at his relative lack of political power (even ominously including the power to execute people). As if to compensate for such power,

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<sup>264</sup> For a more ambivalent and sinister reading of the poem as displaying Baraka’s suicidal impulse, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones* 56-57. Also see Nielsen, *Black Chant* 51-53.

<sup>265</sup> For a perceptive reading of the poem, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka* 43-48.

<sup>266</sup> The section is entitled in German-Yiddish “die schwartze Bohemien [the black bohemian].”

however, he boasts of having a secret/sacred knowledge, “satori” [epiphany, enlightenment], of language and imagination (13).

“To a Publisher . . . Cut-Out,” also records Baraka’s continuing exploration of Zen: “I ride the 14th St. bus/ every day... reading Hui neng,” (20). Hui neng was one of the most important Zen/Chan masters, who lived in the 7th-century China. Moreover, in “SCENARIO VI,” the speaker shows off “a series of dramatic half-turns I learned/ many years ago in the orient . . . (23).

While these are little more than rhetorical decorations that add little to the poems’ substance, Baraka also used figures of Asia to address his central concern at the time: existential anxiety inflected by his racial difference. In “The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,” Baraka responds to a notorious instance of racial stereotyping in the American popular cultural imaginary.<sup>267</sup> The poem, however, does not explicitly reject the yellow-facing racist ventriloquism in the figure of Dr. Fu Manchu, who represents Asian male as effeminate, cunning, and evil, or Dr. Fu Manchu’s no less egregiously but inversely stereotyped (that is, hyper-masculinized) “Nubian slaves.” Unlike Baraka of the militant late-60s and early-70s, his reaction to such racial caricatures is not that of outrage but of pensive self-reflection: “If I think myself/ strong, then I am/ not true to the misery/ in my life. The uncertainty./ (of what I am saying, who/ I have chose [*sic.*] to become.”

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<sup>267</sup> For the critical look at the intertwined history of the hyper-masculinization of African American men and the emasculation of Asian American men, see Daniel Y. Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity*.



The psychological trauma inflicted by racial stereotyping is salved (if only momentarily) by the knowledge of his own worth: “. . . If/ I think myself ugly/ & go to the mirror, smiling/ at the inaccuracy. . . / . . . I think/ how very wise I am. How very/ very wise (42).

Another example, “The Death of Nick Charles,” contains a line, “lovely chinese ladies/ sweeping the sidewalk” (33). These Chinese ladies are represented as objects of envy, reinforcing the weariness of the poem’s speaker.<sup>268</sup>

As “Lines to García Lorca,” “The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,” and “The Death of Nick Charles” confirm, Baraka’s sense of loneliness, alienation, and weariness was either assuaged or deteriorated by comparative references to Asia, Asians, and Asians Americans. The most important of all the poems in this period, “Parthenos,” which appeared in the fourth issue of *Yūgen*, is revealing in this context. The poem creates a multiracial/multiethnic genealogy for its speaker, who claims to be descended from four mothers, each of whom represents a different racial/ethnic heritage.

The Arcadian first section (presumably set in Africa) celebrates blackness as it sings of the “ebon princess” who rides “her black horse” (23) in the morning; the second section continues in this vein. As night comes on (“very early/ when night was a pickaninny on a pony), the princess “danced/ and wore rings of flowers” (24). A bracketed command, “(chantnow),” however, suddenly disrupts these idyllic images:

My chinese mother  
is full of compassion

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<sup>268</sup> For a perceptive reading of this poem, see Sollors, *Amiri Baraka* 58-63.

my japanese mother

dances all day

I have a white mother

pale as a bone, with

red moons smeared in

her cheeks, who thinks

nothing of vanishing

trailing leis of orange flames.

...

My black mother

Was a witch doctor

a crazywoman with a red cape.

hucklebucking beneath the pyramids.

(*Yūgen* 4: 24)

The contrast the poem draws between the speaker's black mother and the Chinese, the Japanese, and the white ones is disturbingly stark, to say the least. The poem highlights the striking racial difference, as it represents the speaker's Chinese mother as "compassionate," the Japanese as energetic and care-free (she "dances all day"), and the white as reliable (she "thinks nothing of vanishing"), while depicting his black mother in a negative light. Moreover, while the present tense is used to describe the three non-black mothers ("is," "dances," "thinks"), the black mother is the only one who is referred here in the past tense: "My black mother/ Was a witch doctor." Why does the

speaker accept all the mothers except the black one, who is contemptuously described as “a crazywoman with a red cape”? Could this be a frustrated lament of an embittered son who was somehow abandoned by his black mother?

Perhaps, we should read the poem more allegorically, and think of the mixed-race son as a symbol of the United States. In this reading, the poem seems to critique the United States as it continues to disown the African heritage despite its vaunted ideal of multiraciality. It is true that the speaker, “who clutches the past/ in his bony fist,” does try desperately to dismantle the stark racial hierarchy (“those/ finally visible hierarchies/ Of angelic intelligences” (25), in section III. His effort, however, does not seem to bear fruit.

Although its ultimate message is far from clear, “Parthenos” recalls Claire-Jean Kim’s theory of “racial triangulation,”<sup>269</sup> as it prefigures the post-1965 image of Asian Americans as a “model minority.” Gary Okihiro, among others, has pointed out that the model minority discourse has historically been deployed to denigrate African Americans by constructing what Baraka here poetically alludes to “visible hierarchies/ Of angelic intelligences,” where Asians are given “honorary white” status.<sup>270</sup>

One of the essays from this period entitled, “Soul Food” (1962), similarly foregrounds the triangular operation of racial discourse in the United States. In the article, Baraka takes issues with an unnamed younger African American novelist’s

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<sup>269</sup> “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans” 105-38.

<sup>270</sup> For a critique of the model minority thesis in relation to the discourse of the yellow peril, see Okihiro, “Is Yellow Black or White?” 31-63.

recent article in *Esquire*. Ironically, Baraka here forgets his own rhetorical deployment of the Chinese ladies in “The Death of Nick Charles” and the Chinese and the Japanese mothers in “Parthenos,” which self-deprecatingly casts African Americans in a negative light through racial triangulation.<sup>271</sup> The gist of the younger black writer’s claim, as Baraka summarizes it, is as follows: “one of the things wrong with Negroes was that, unlike the Chinese, boots [referring to African Americans] have neither a language of their own nor a characteristic cuisine” (121). Baraka chastises the younger author for what he sees as the latter’s internalization of anti-black racism. Referring to soul food and the rich vocabulary to describe its nicety and variety, Baraka scathingly ends his essay by declaring that if an African American is in Harlem and eats at “Nedicks [a N.Y. fast food chain],” rather than at a soul-food joint, he must be a “square” (123).

In addition to the editorial endorsement of Asian-influenced poetry and his own poetic references to Asia and to the people of Asian descent, Baraka’s personal interaction with Mike/Matsumi Kanemitsu, a Japanese-American abstract expressionist painter, serves as yet another evidence of the multiracial make-up of the avant-garde community in New York at the time. Kanemitsu was a *kibei*, a Japanese American born in the U.S. but was sent back as an infant to his parents’ native country to receive education. Kanemitsu was a close friend of Frank O’Hara and Kerouac. In 1959, when Baraka and Hettie grew increasingly alienated from each other (due partly to Baraka’s extramarital affairs including one with Diane Di Prima), Hettie had a brief affair with

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<sup>271</sup> Watts has critically enlisted numerous cases from throughout Baraka’s life that are reminiscent of this one. See, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*.

Kanemitsu. This was right after Kanemitsu did the cover illustration of Charles Olson's seminal booklet, *Projective Verse*, which Baraka and Hettie "resurrected" from an earlier magazine through their imprint, the Totem Press.<sup>272</sup> Kanemitsu's dynamic use of Japanese *sumi* ink and brush strokes on the cover of Olson's book is an eloquent if somewhat ironic testament to the colorful composition of the Village's multiracial bohemian circle.<sup>273</sup>

Baraka would more or less accurately recall the night of the showdown between himself and Kanemitsu in his autobiography.<sup>274</sup> In his reconstruction of the night, however, Baraka, perhaps out of lingering bitterness, ethnicizes the Japanese American painter's speech and even refers to Kanemitsu contemptuously as "Luke Sashimi (240). In "Going Down Slow," a short story collected in *Tales* (1967), Baraka more self-servingly fictionalized the night, in which he figures himself as "Lew Crosby" and

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<sup>272</sup> The essay had already been published in Rolf Fjelde's *Poetry New York Magazine* (1950). According to Lorenzo Thomas, it was Baraka who "resurrected" the now influential essay by republishing it in a booklet form (200).

<sup>273</sup> For more on his life and work, see John Yau, "Kanemitsu in California during the 1960s and 70s"; Melonie Magruder, "The Art of the Print: Exhibit of artist Matsumi Kanemitsu's work at LACMA, curated by a Malibu resident, emphasizes the impact of Asian-American artist in the 20th century"; Sharon Mizota, "Art Review: Matsumi Kanemitsu at Sabina Lee"; Kyoko Norma Nozaki, "*Kibei nisei Kanemitsu Matsumi no jinsei to geijyutsu: aidentiti no nijyusei*. [“Just Like Sunshine, Like Moon (light)”: The Life of Matsumi Kanemitsu, a Kibei Artist.”]; and the obituary on *New York Times*, "Matsumi Kanemitsu, 69, artist who worked in four mediums."

<sup>274</sup> Cohen's autobiography, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, corroborates the accuracy of Baraka's account of the night.

Kanemitsu as “Mauro.” In this fictionalized version of the night, Baraka goes to the painter’s apartment and knocks him down with a metal pipe (58-59), even though he was in reality too timid to fight the man, who, as he recalled, “had offered once to teach me judo” (240). Ironically enough, right after the incident, Frank O’Hara contributed “Personal Poem” to the sixth issue of *Yūgen*. In the poem, Baraka and Kanemitsu appear side by side as two of O’Hara’s close friends.

To summarize this section, the meaning of the heterogeneous figures of Asia, Asians, and Asian Americans evoked by Baraka in this early phase are by no means clear and constitute part of what he calls “the mosaic of disorder.” In some cases, they seem to empower him (recall the Buddhist monks in orange robes in “Lines to García Lorca”), while others, through negative comparison, cause jealousy and despair in the black poet.

## II. The Taboo of the Watermelon and the Decolonization of the Black Mind

So far, I have demonstrated how a desired but risky taste of a globe-fish serves as a crucial figure of *Yūgen*’s avant-gardist, adventurous aspiration on the one hand, and how that symbol can then be read as encapsulating the tremendous interest in Asia among some of its black and white contributors on the other. In the late 50s and the early 60s, there was another food which served Baraka as an important symbol. In the aforementioned article, “Soul Food,” Baraka refers to watermelon as an “African” food that African Americans should be able to claim as their own: “The watermelon, friend,

was imported from Africa (by whom?) where it had been growing many centuries before it was necessary for some people to deny they had ever tasted one” (122). Because of the pernicious stereotype in the American cultural imaginary, watermelon was (and continues to be) viewed by some African Americans (the middle-class in particular) as distasteful. The avant-garde, bohemian Baraka in the 50s and early 60s viewed the avoidance of watermelon as a manifestation of the black bourgeoisie’s desire to be “white,” and relentlessly critiqued it.

For the same reason, Baraka represented the consumption of watermelon as a provocative gesture of transgression and rebellion. In the “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature,’” also published in 1962, he proudly recalls his earlier attempt to defy the African American middle-class’s sense of respectability by violating this very taboo. When he was still a student at Howard, a prestigious, historically black college, Baraka was “chastised severely for daring to eat a piece of watermelon on . . . campus.” “Do you realize,” the man who rebuked Baraka asked, “you’re sitting near the highway?” The man was worried that white people might pass by and see Baraka with a slice of watermelon in his hand, and become convinced of the stereotype (130).

In a well-known passage, James Baldwin has also noted the taboo of eating watermelon, comparing it to the middle-class African Americans’ distaste for the black vernacular culture. In the following scene, the young novelist was in Switzerland, trying to finish his first book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin recalls how the blues helped him open the door to his repressed memories:

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I would not touch watermelon) . . . .<sup>275</sup>

As he began listening to Smith's blues, Baldwin was gradually liberated from his fear of reinforcing racist stereotypes, and came to terms with his own past as well as with the African American cultural heritage.

On his part, Baraka defiantly challenged the taboo and viewed the consumption of watermelon as a sign of psychological liberation from the enduring legacies of racism, a step towards the decolonization of the black mind.

### III. The Invention of "Low Coup"

In the rest of this chapter, I will look briefly at the trajectory of Baraka's career as a poet in the 60s and the 70s and conclude by showing how he has creatively mixed haiku and the dozens, the African American vernacular tradition. Even though he was reading haiku and Chinese poetry in the 50s and 60s, he apparently did not try to adopt these forms at the time. In the 1990s, however, he began an interesting experiment with the

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<sup>275</sup> "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" 138. For the significance of watermelon as an (African) American fetish, see Kevin Young's recent discussion of this very passage in *The Grey Album* 46-48.



former. To continue the metaphorical line I have been pursuing, I want to show how his unique poetic form, “low coup,” fuses the Japanese and the African cultural traditions, mixing Baraka’s tastes for a globe-fish (haiku) and for a watermelon (the dozens).

Baraka’s “pre-black days” (*Autobiography* xxi) began to fade with his trip to Cuba in 1960 (and definitely ended with the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965). In the introduction to *Home: Social Essays* (1966), he famously declared, “By the time this book appears, I will be even blacker” (22). Just as he left his bohemian life and became “blacker” day by day, he also put an end to his interracial marriage. Now enamored with a “hyper-Black” (*ibid.* xxi) militancy, Baraka’s interest in the 60s came to be more and more politicized and racialized. The change of orientation was also spectacularly dramatized by his second wedding. In 1967, he married Sylvia Robinson, an African American, this time in a Yoruba ceremony, held in Harlem (*Autobiography* 378).

Baraka’s deepening racial consciousness decisively affected the subsequent development of his poetics. Before his trip to Cuba, he had devised an individualist poetics, which he went on to revise and elaborate during the 60s.<sup>276</sup> “How You

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<sup>276</sup> Sollors has perceptively pointed out the deep contradiction in the positions taken by Baraka and other Black Arts intellectuals during this era: “And it is equally puzzling that many writers of the Black Arts Movement were formally Western avant-gardists, although they expressed strong ethnic exhortation. The demand for a ‘collective’ art was often a camouflage for individualistic, modernizing artists who feigned collectivity. Despite all the invocation of ‘the people,’ despite the claims that alienation has been transcended in Black cultural nationalism, there remains a struggle between the elitist writer and the people who are to learn the right Black consciousness from him. Writing ‘for the people’ may mask a deep-seated opposition to the people” (*Amiri Baraka/*

Sound??” was written in 1959 and published in the Donald. M. Allen’s epoch-making *The New American Poetry* in 1960, under a powerful influence of Charles Olson’s *Projective Verse*. In this text, Baraka declares his absolute independence and freedom as a poet: “I CAN BE ANYHTING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives” (424). Reiterating Olson’s rhetorical question, “Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it’s thar,” Baraka continued:

I’m not interested in writing sonnets, sestinas or anything . . . only poems. . . .  
The only “recognizable tradition” a poet need follow is himself . . . & . . . all  
those things out of tradition he can use, adapt, work over, into something for  
himself. To broaden his *own* voice with. (You have to start and finish there . . .  
your own voice . . . how you sound.)

(425; italics original; ellipses mine)

In “Hunting is Not Those Heads on the Wall” (1964), a few years later, Baraka introduced the idea of “art-ing,” which privileges the verb, the process, and the natural while criticizing the thing, the noun, the product, the object, and the artificial (199-201).<sup>277</sup> In other words, “art-ing” emphasized the spontaneous and the improvisational.

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*LeRoi Jones* 194).

<sup>277</sup> For a meticulous history of the eclectic sources of Baraka’s term, see Sollors, “Toward a Definition of Art-ing” in *Amiri Baraka* 72-82.

Another characteristic of Baraka's poems, essays and speeches from this period (and even earlier) is the frequent use of puns: eye/I, son/sun, concrete (adjective/noun), Lincoln (the president/ a car coveted by black bourgeoisie), a sexual pun on Jesus's Second "Coming," "State/Meant," fair (light skin/ justice), Negro/Knee-Grow, air force/error farce, Newark/ New Ark, Why's/Wise.<sup>278</sup> Noting this characteristic, some critics have suggested a specific influence of Olson, who remarked that "pun is rime" in the "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," which Baraka published in 1959, along with *Projective Verse*.<sup>279</sup> During an interview in the early 1980s, however, Baraka dismissed Olson's influence (though he publicly acknowledged his debts to the poet in other respects). Instead, Baraka identified his fondness of the pun as "a street thing" (Melhem 252). Furthermore, reflecting his emerging cosmopolitan position at the time, he described the extensive use of the pun as belonging firmly but not exclusively to the African American oral tradition: "the rhyme and the pun are really part of the Black oral tradition. I think they're part of everybody's oral tradition" (252).

Since 1974, as Baraka outgrew black nationalism and further transformed himself into a third-world socialist by upholding Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-Tung thought,

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<sup>278</sup> For the contexts in which these puns occur, see Sollors, *op.cit.*, 12-13, 179, 271. n.3 and 281. n.12; Harris 98, 110-11; Melhem, "Amiri Baraka" 252-53.

<sup>279</sup> Melhem, *op. cit.* 252-53; Harris suggests the use of pun ("in we/us—eye") in "Class Struggle in Music" collected in *Reggae or Not* (1981) is specifically influenced by Olson's eye metaphor ("polis [the ideal city] is eyes") in "Letter 6" of *The Maximus Poems* (110-11).

his interest in Asia, particularly in China, was revitalized.<sup>280</sup> As a matter of fact, he repeatedly emphasized Lu Hsun's influence on his own literary and political endeavors since the mid-70.<sup>281</sup> The title of his essay collection during this period, *Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979* (1984),<sup>282</sup> for example, alludes to the Chinese writer's

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<sup>280</sup> Melhem lists Lu Hsun's *Selected Stories*, 2nd. (1972) and Mao's *Talks at the Yenan Forum of Literature and Art* (1967) and *Five Documents on Literature and Art* (1967) as "important influences on Baraka's recent thinking" (263, n.13). In addition, it should be noted that there are a few references to Asia even in his hyper-black nationalist years, i.e. during the late 60s. For instance, "New Sense" collected in *Tales* (1967), borrows (rather stereotypically) Confucius's authority to counter Eurocentrism: "The thinkers try. The extremists, Confucius says, shooting past the mark. But the straight ahead people, who think when that's what's called for, who don't when they don't have to. Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit, to always be weighing and measuring and analyzing, and reflecting. The reflective vs. the expressive. Mahler vs. Martha and the Vandellas. It's not even an interesting battle" (197). His earlier interest in Confucius is also confirmed by the poem "Confucius Say," which appeared in *Combustion* 13 (May 1960), 3. In fact, as recently as in 2000, Baraka quotes the Chinese philosopher to condemn white supremacy: "Like Confucius said, 'If people hear the wrong music, the Empire will fall'" ("Multinational, Multicultural America Versus White Supremacy" 236-37).

<sup>281</sup> See Sollors, *Amiri Baraka* 247, 249, 252; Benston, "Amiri Baraka" 111; Melhem, "Revolution: The Constancy of Change" 192-93.

<sup>282</sup> One of the essays in the collection, "A Trip to Tokyo: Emergency International Conference on Korea," needs to be noted briefly. After Baraka was forced to "withdraw" from the conference mentioned in the title (he apparently wanted to talk about the "successful" communist leadership in the North Korea, which was clearly unwelcome at the conference), he decided to attend the Afro-Asian Writers Association instead. He had discussions with Oda Makoto, one of the leading figures of *Beheiren* [an anti-Vietnam War group], Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist, and an Algerian

characterizations of his short essay form, which Baraka adopted as his own favored daily “struggle form.”<sup>283</sup>

Although Baraka’s interests in Mao and Lu Hsun are fascinating and deserve more analysis, I will instead conclude this chapter with his more recent poetic experiment, which has received relatively scant critical attention.<sup>284</sup> In a 1998 essay, which harshly criticized the commercialization and cooptation of jazz and hip hop, Baraka claimed to have invented a new literary form: “low coup.” According to his own definition, it is “an Afro-American verse form . . . as distinct from the Japanese Haiku.”<sup>285</sup> “If Elvis Presley is/ King/ Who is James Brown?/ God?” is one of the examples of this form.

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poet named Saib (66) about the role of the writer in contemporary society. Not surprisingly, however, Baraka, the third-world socialist, rejected the liberalism of Oda and called for the thorough-going attack on the bourgeois class, which apparently did not resonate with his Japanese counterpart.

<sup>283</sup> Baraka explains the influence in the following terms: “Lu Hsun wrote in many forms. When he was a revolutionary democrat he used the short story—and the stories are great. . . . But later on, as his own kind of understanding intensified, he changed his form, and the form that he used most was what he called the ‘short essay form,’ in which he combined poetry and revolutionary observation. I see now that that is a very comfortable form—short, two or three pages. He used it, as he says, like a ‘daggar [*sic.*] and a javelin’—you know, to draw blood quickly and demolish. . . . The short essay form is really suited for the kind of daily struggle I’m engaged in—it’s kind of *struggle form*; you can do a lot of things in it” (Benston, “Amiri Baraka” 111; italics original).

<sup>284</sup> For more on Lu Hsun’s influence on Baraka as a revolutionary essayist, see Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* 432-33.

<sup>285</sup> “‘The International Business of Jazz’ and the Need for the Cooperative and Collective Self-Development of an International People’s Culture” (96-97). Baraka quotes the same poem again in “What You Mean, Du Wop?” 116.

In 2000, the Chinese American pianist, Jon Jang, and the African American saxophonist, David Murray, featured one of Baraka's low coups in *River of Life*, their collaborative jazz album. In the glowing review, Baraka praised the duo's music adaptation of his own poetic form. This time, he described low coups as "an Afro-American tribute form," which he invented as a result of "the long reading of Japanese Haiku form." According to his own definition, low coup has "[n]o fixed amount of syllables like the classic, just short and sharp" (*Digging* 403).

This Afro-Asian hybrid form can be seen as a fruit of his long search for what he called a "post-American form" ("What the Arts Need Now" 7), which he articulated in 1967 as an attempt to re-center the black experience in art by displacing what he understood as the white mainstream values in the United States.

In 2004, Baraka published *Un Poco Low Coups* from Ishmael Reed Publishing Company. This 23-page chapbook featured a low coup (sometimes two or three) on every page, each with an illustration drawn by Baraka himself. Almost all of the poems in this volume satirically critique white supremacy and capitalism from the perspective of an African American revolutionary Marxist: "Since the rich eat/ more than/ anybody else/ it's reasonable to/ assume/ that they are/ more full of/ SHIT" (7); "Low Coup for Bush 2: The Main Thing/ Wrong/ w/You/ Is/ You Ain't/ In/ Jail" (10) ; "Culture:/ european jews/ say the devil/ speak perfect/ german/ black/ americans on/ the other/ hand say, he/ speak pretty/ good english/ too! (14)"; "CRAZINESS IS NO ACT/ NOT TO ACT IS CRAZINESS (17); "Heaven appeared/ with property/ God/ with Slavery"

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(18). Yet another low coup celebrates blackness, “We are/ The blues/ Our Selvz/ The Actual Song” (12).

The use of visual images juxtaposed to the text in *Un Poco Low Coups* may remind the reader familiar with the haiku tradition of the work of Yosa Buson (1716-1784), the eighteenth-century Japanese haiku poet, who was also a painter. Whatever the aesthetic merits of his illustrations may be, Baraka’s choice to insert them to accompany the texts confirms his recognition of the centrality of the painterly eye, the visual imagination, which is vital for writing haiku.<sup>286</sup>

Unlike in haiku, however, the visual dimension of Baraka’s low coups is certainly secondary to the significance of the aural. This is because Baraka’s poetics has been modeled primarily after black music. In his transcultural riffing on the poetic tradition historically associated with the Japanese, Baraka literally turns it upside down through his favorite rhetorical technique: the pun. He once described this rhetorical device, often regarded as unsophisticated in the Western literary tradition, as based on “delicious accident [followed by] a much more rational juxtaposition of sounds and things” (Melhem 252). Knowing full well that Japanese classic haiku poets also looked down

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<sup>286</sup> In *In Ghostly Japan*, for instance, Lafcadio Hearn points out the “common principle of Japanese pictorial illustration”:

By the use of a few chosen words the composer of a short poem endeavours to do exactly what the painter endeavours to do with a few strokes of the brush—to evoke an image or a mood—to revive a sensation or emotion. And the accomplishment of this purpose—by poet or by picturemaker—depends altogether upon capacity to suggest, and only to suggest. (154)

More on this subject, see Arrowsmith 130.

upon this technique, no less than Western poets have done, Baraka deliberately deploys the pun as he transculturally remakes the haiku form through the African American vernacular tradition: the dozens.

As a matter of fact, Baraka is not the only African America poet to expand the tonal and sonic dimensions of haiku in their haiku-inspired poetry. Harryette Mullen, for instance, has also consciously used the pun to create her haiku-inspired work:

moon whoever knew you  
had a high IQ until tonight  
so high and mighty bright  
poets salute you with haiku.<sup>287</sup>

Moreover, Baraka's adaptation of haiku foregrounds the centrality of politics in his poetry. While *Ku* in Japanese means a "verse," Baraka's "coup" consciously inscribes his political rebelliousness. The title of his latest book, *Un Poco Low Coups*, in itself is a pun on "locofoco," a faction of the Democratic Party in the mid-nineteenth century which attacked economic monopoly and vehemently criticized its rival organization, Tammany Hall, in New York City.<sup>288</sup> In contrast to many of the classic haiku poets, who sought to transcend the world of the mortals, Baraka commandeers the form for his

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<sup>287</sup> For a more extended reading of this stanza, see Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics* 104-05.

<sup>288</sup> According to *Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary*, the term derived from *locomotive* and *fuoco*, meaning "fire" in Italian, and originally referred to a kind of friction match. For more on the Locofocos, see Degler, "The Locofocos: Urban 'Agrarians.'"



political struggle (though his low coups seem unlikely to bring about an anti-capitalist revolution any time soon).

Baraka's low coups also signal a radical modification of his individualistic poetics of the art-ting, which he had developed in the 60s. As a matter of fact, as early as in 1974, around the time when he became a Third-World socialist, he started to revise his previous position as an individualist poet, and began to appreciate the value of a more collective poetry-making:

If you're a modern artist who's not some kind of cultural nationalist, you understand that you can learn from anything and anybody, see that the whole of world culture is at your disposal, because no one people has created the monuments of art and culture in the world, it's been collective. (Interview, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 249-50).

Since the mid-70s, Baraka has endeavored to borrow and build on the world's common cultural heritages, rather than "mak[ing] a poetry" in an unabashedly egoistic manner, out of "all the garbage of our lives" (424).

Finally, one should point out that even though Baraka has become tamer (and this, despite the recent scandal over his poem "Somebody Blew Up America," which led not only to his removal from the New Jersey Poet Laureateship but to the abolition of the Laureateship itself), he has never lost his acerbic sense of humor. As I have already discussed, Baraka understood humor to be one of the central tenets of Zen, and would often pull "Zen jokes" on his friends. A perfect example of this would be the following low coup: "Buddha asked Monk, 'If you were always right.../ Would it be easier/ or

more difficult/ living in the world?'/ 'I knew you would ask that!' said Monk, blue, and invisible" (11). Here the African American jazz pianist, Thelonius Monk, literally becomes a Buddhist monk, and even gives the Buddha a lesson in life.

Baraka's low coups may not look or sound like classic Japanese haiku in the eyes and ears of cultural purists. It is certainly true that the serene spirituality of Zen is all but absent in Baraka's rambunctious low coups. Instead of faithfully emulating the classic conventions of haiku, however, Baraka has found another way of inheriting the poetic tradition historically associated with the Japanese. To hazard a pun yet again, while recognizing the subtle art of Zen-inspired haiku, Baraka has consciously played the dozens on Zen and subversively transformed the poetics of allusion and suggestiveness into a series of explicit political statements that contest white supremacy and the rapaciousness of capitalism. In doing so, Baraka has indeed "broadened his own voice," giving us a delicious taste of the rich diversity, or what I have called the multi-tonality, of African American haiku.

Conclusion:

“Color of Your Song”: The Continuing Diversification of Cosmopolitan Blackness

*I still hear your humming Mama. The color of your song calls me home. The color of your words saying “Let her be. She got a right to be different. She gonna stumble on herself one of these days. Just let the child be.”*

Sonia Sanchez, an interview with D. H. Melhem, “Sonia Sanchez: Will and Spirit.”

*Black Notes on Asia: Composite Figurations of Asia in the African American Transcultural Imagination, 1923-2013* has traced the ever-growing figures of Asia in African American transcultural/transracial imagination throughout the twentieth century. I would like to end by examining one last instance of African American adaptation of a poetic tradition rooted in Asia: Sonia Sanchez’s transcultural engagement with haiku, which has recently received some critical attention.<sup>289</sup> Attesting to the diversity of African American haiku, her adaptation demonstrates not only significant similarities to the work of other African American haiku poets, but also notable differences.

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<sup>289</sup> See De Lancey, Frenzella Elaine, “Refusing to Be Boxed In: Sonia Sanchez’s Transformation of the Haiku Form”; D. H. Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* 168-70; Joyce A. Joyce, *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez* 33-35; Ryan, Jennifer D. “Nationhood Re-Formed: Revolutionary Style and Practice in Sonia Sanchez’s Jazz Poetics.”

Sanchez has spent the past few decades boldly expanding haiku's formal and thematic possibilities. As Franzella Elaine De Lancey has accurately pointed out, most of her haiku should be read as imaginative transcultural adaptations of the haiku form: "Sometimes working within the structural strictures of classical Japanese haiku form, other times altering the form to fit her needs . . . Sanchez forces the form to accommodate her vision" (23). Like Lewis G. Alexander and Richard Wright, she has extensively written about nature—*Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (1998) offers many instances of this.<sup>290</sup> At the same time, reminding the haiku-inspired poems of Dudley Randall, JoAnn Anderson, and Amiri Baraka, her haiku also address subjects that are unconventional according to the standard set by the Japanese classics. In her haiku, she has celebrated black heritage (both diasporic and domestic), articulated the womanist [black feminist] critique of male chauvinism, given voice to individual as well as collective traumas, and sung of sensuality and love. In other words, her heterogeneous body of work inspired by haiku has thematically explored the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

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<sup>290</sup> See Hakutani, "Cross-Cultural Poetics: Sonia Sanchez's *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums*" 180-94. By focusing exclusively on this volume, Hakutani tends to overemphasize what he sees as Sanchez's deliberate avoidance of the political in haiku. The more accurate way to grasp her writing in this form, however, is to pay attention to its rich diversity, reading both her explicitly political haiku and seemingly apolitical ones side by side and asking whether such clear distinctions will hold. As I shall demonstrate, it is precisely haiku's capacity (at least for Sanchez) to deal simultaneously with the political and the apolitical, history and memory, the past and the present, pain and pleasure, that has attracted her to the form in the first place.

In *Morning Haiku* (2010), the most recent collection of her haiku and *tanka*, Sanchez has sung of the rebels, heroes, and martyrs of the black liberation struggle: “9 haiku (for Freedom’s Sisters)” dedicates a haiku each to Kathleen Cleaver, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Shabazz, Fanny Lou Hamer, Barbara Jordan, Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers-Williams, and Dorothy Irene Height. As the endnotes explain to the reader, these are African American female leaders and activists in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power, whose achievements and contributions have been simply forgotten or overshadowed by those of their male counterparts. In a series of powerful haiku, Sanchez poetically restores the black female presence in the history of the African American struggle. For instance, the haiku dedicated to the civil rights leader, Fannie Lou Hamer, memorializes her achievements in three compact lines: “feet deep/ in cotton you shifted/ the country’s eyes” (71). Lifting the form out of its Eastern origin, the haiku in honor of Parks recasts the iconic Civil Rights heroine in biblical terms: “(Rosa Parks) baptizer of/ morning light walking us away/ from reserved spaces” (ibid.).

The volume also includes “14 haiku (for Emmett Louis Till),” which evoke Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in their imagistic superimposition of the Southern landscape/skyscape onto the lynched black body:

4.  
 your pores  
 wild stars embracing  
 southern eyes

5.

foot prints blooming  
in the night remember  
your blood  
...

In her poetry as well as in her essays, Sanchez has generally preferred to use the lowercased “i” for the first person pronoun. In an interview with D. H. Melhem, she has explained that this stylistic characteristic is a conscious choice, embodying her distaste for the aggrandized ego.<sup>291</sup> This humility interestingly creates a unique voice which falls somewhere between the impersonal voice of the classic haiku tradition and the lyrical voice of Romanticism:

13.

walking in Mississippi  
i hold the stars  
between my teeth

The poetic “i” here is clearly posited as larger than life, as she defies the objective reality through her lyricism. But this same “i,” as she mourns for the victim of a man-made tragedy, is overwhelmed by the ineffable feelings of pain and rage, and is humbled by her powerlessness:

14.

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<sup>291</sup> “Sonia Sanchez: The Will and the Spirit.” *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* 172.

your death  
a blues, i could not  
drink away. (10-12)

In this poem and a group of poems which she has entitled “blues haiku,” Sanchez emphasizes the affinity between haiku and the blues in her attempt to suggest—if not to articulate fully—ineffable feelings.<sup>292</sup>

Sanchez also celebrates numerous African American musicians (Max Roach, Odetta, Ray Brown, Sara Vaughan), poets (Eugene Redmond, Maya Angelou), a novelist (Toni Morrison), artists (Beauford Delaney, John Dowell, Elizabeth Catlett) and a talk-show host/philanthropist (Oprah Winfrey). Her book thus thematically “African Americanize” haiku.<sup>293</sup>

In terms of form, Sanchez’s mash-up of haiku imaginatively manipulates by shrinking and bending the rigid 5-7-5 rhythmic structure and fuses it with her distinctly African American, female vocal. Her eloquent African Americanization of the haiku form bears a close resemblance to Amiri Baraka’s riffing on the Japanese tradition: “low coup.” In fact, while continuing to write in this form, her poetic energy, “the

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<sup>292</sup> For more on this connection, see Frenzella Elaine De Lancey, “Refusing to Be Boxed In: Sonia Sanchez’s Transformation of the Haiku Form” and Jennifer D. Ryan, *Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History*, esp. 64-65.

<sup>293</sup> “African Americanize” may be misleading, for Sanchez also includes in this volume a haiku that irreverently and tauntingly “resurrect” St. Augustine as a “Playboy of North/ Africa,” thereby adding a diasporic dimension as well. In addition, using a word coined by her ex-husband, Etheridge Knight, Sanchez can be seen as “swinging” haiku.

outburst of the ebony muse” to recall Countee Cullen, has broken the rigid shell of haiku and created for itself a new poetic form: “sonku” (Sonia + ku [which means “verse” in Japanese]), in the 4-3-4-3 syllabic structure.

Sanchez has been publishing her haiku since 1973, when her second book of poetry, *Love Poems*, came out. *Morning Haiku* reprints one of her earliest works as an epigraph to demonstrate her continuing interest: “Let me wear the day/ Well so when it reaches you/ You will enjoy it.” She wrote this haiku, as she recalls in an interview, after she made an international call home while travelling in China.<sup>294</sup> The form, the content, and the geographical location of the poem’s production eloquently contradict the supposed distance between the East and the West, and more specifically, between Asia and African America, suggesting that there are many ways of imaginatively connecting different areas and cultures of the world.

Critics have read Sanchez’s haiku primarily from the womanist, Black Aesthetic, blues aesthetic, and/or Afrocentric perspectives (Ryan & De Lancey), or through a comparison with the classic Japanese model (Hakutani). To conclude my dissertation, however, I would like to emphasize another aspect of her work: the cosmopolitan implications of her haiku. Sanchez’s interest in recognizing commonalities of human beings beyond the national, cultural, geographic and racial boundaries go even further back to the mid-50s. In the preface of *Morning Haiku*, entitled “haikuography,” Sanchez recalls her encounter with the form as a life-changing experience. Significantly, she

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<sup>294</sup> Melhem, op. cit. 168-70.



registers the moment as an unexpected form of home-coming, an “awakening” of a long buried consciousness:

It’s something to find yourself in a poem—to discover the beauty that i knew resided somewhere in my twenty-one-year-old bloodstream; from the moment i asked the clerk in the bookstore if i was pronouncing this haiku word correctly, i knew that i had discovered me, had found an awakening, an awareness that i was connected not only to nature, but to the nature of myself and others; from the moment i saw the blood veins behind beautiful eyes, the fluids in teeth, and the enamel in tongues, i knew that haiku were no short-term memory, but a long memory. (49)

In an earlier interview, she had also recalled the same episode with a slightly more emotional touch:

I opened this book and started to read this haiku...and slid down on the floor and started to cry because I had found me, secreted in between these three lines I had found me, my soul, my spirit.<sup>295</sup>

As she states in the earlier interview, she might actually have been “19 and 1/2 years” old, when she stumbled upon haiku in the 8th Street bookstore in New York City.<sup>296</sup> In any case, this fascinating anecdote is significant for several reasons. First, the “discovery” of haiku is described as a moment of the African American poet’s self-recognition and self-validation. One should pay special attention here, for the

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<sup>295</sup> See Sanchez, “From Blues to Haiku.”

<sup>296</sup> This is probably the same bookstore, Orientalia, that Baraka frequented.

“discovery” is not represented as the disorientating, violent or shocking experience of recognizing the negatively racialized difference, such as those recounted in the autobiographies of W. E. B. Du Bois or of Booker T. Washington. The “discovery ” of “me” in a supposedly “foreign” form is a cause of celebration.

Secondly, despite all the apparent references to biology (“bloodstream” and “nature of myself”), Sanchez explicitly represents her “awakening” not as an atavistic resurfacing of racialized traits or temperaments, but as a recognition of the much older and deeper commonality (“of myself and others”) as well as humanity’s symbiosis with nature. To transnationalize Werner Sollors’s well-known formulation of the dialectic tension between race/ethnicity and nationality in the United States, this is not a typical confirmation of “descent” (race/ethnicity) but a dramatic enactment of “consent,” an affirmation of a desire to be a citizen of the world.<sup>297</sup> By recognizing herself in haiku, Sanchez transculturally constructs a collective identity beyond race and nation. She shows that haiku, in the space of seventeen syllables, can bring peoples together into a community beside (if not beyond) races and nations by evoking a “long memory,” that predates the birth of racism and the nation states, which are after all very modern discursive inventions, certainly not as old as the “blood veins behind beautiful eyes, the fluids in teeth, and the enamel in tongues.”

In the preface to *Morning Haiku*, Sanchez continues to explain what attracted her to the haiku form, again underscoring its affinity to the blues. In chapter 2, I have shown how Wright found liberation from the constraining racial discourse of the United

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<sup>297</sup> See *Beyond Ethnicity* 151-52.

States when he began to produce his projections in the haiku manner as well as blues-inspired poems in transracial/transnational terms. On her part, Sanchez has discovered in haiku a blues-like poetics of resilience that enables her to live her life fully, to accept its dark sides as well as to celebrate its brighter moments:

This haiku, this tough form disguised in beauty and insight, is like the blues, for they both offer no solutions, only a pronouncement, a formal declaration—an acceptance of pain, humor, beauty and non-beauty, death and rebirth, surprise and life. Always life. Both always help us to maintain memory and dignity. (59)

Sanchez explicitly identifies haiku-writing, or haiku-ing, as an art of survival, not in the abstract sense, but with a concrete historical reference in her mind:

I want to let people see the connection between that form and the people who invented it. I think that form has a lot to do with staying alive. When the Japanese were incarcerated in concentration camps, in order to survive they wrote the haiku. The whole idea of beauty and horror at the same time occurs in the haiku . . . the haiku is a discipline about living.

Comparing herself to the interned Japanese Americans, she confesses that haiku literally kept her alive in moments of difficulty:

In the '80s, when I was burnt out and very tired and really working too hard and taking care of a lot of family members at that time, I wrote the haiku. I

could not go beyond the three lines . . . when I went back and looked at that notebook I understood that it kept me alive. When you listen to a blues singer sing the blues, there is that one long breath with the first stanza . . . when you know it works you've said the haiku in one breath and when you do the one breath you know you'll take another breath and know you're alive. There's always with the haiku something that's come before and something that's coming afterwards, which is probably part of that subconscious conversation that comes within the haiku, and the same with the blues.

Moreover, for Sanchez, haiku, like the blues, has become a symbol as well as an on-going practice of building transracial alliance, a solidarity that has been forged in the cauldron of historical traumas:

People forget that part of our emergence as poets and being heard in the '60s was during a war too, so there was this amazing movement of trying to say to people, "This is what happened to people of color, to black people, to Japanese"—because when I went searching for myself I found Japanese in concentration camps . . . because we were excavating our own lives and history we found all these other histories and herstories.

Just as Richard Wright sought "a home for the hearts of all men" through his de-Occidentalizing practice of haiku, Sanchez continues to remind us through her transcultural engagement with the form that the discovery of one's self may really be a

discovery of the Other in the self, the self in the Other. In other words, haiku has enabled her to corroborate the interconnectedness of our lives beyond race and the nation state.

Since Lewis G. Alexander published his “Japanese Hokkus” in 1923, various African American poets have imaginatively experimented with haiku to challenge the arbitrary fiction of race and to break free from cultural segregation. Instead of renouncing their cultural heritage, these African American haiku poets have simultaneously embraced “blackness” in its diversity while participating in, to recall Elizabeth Matthews’s ideal, the “broader field of universal literature.” Powerfully contesting the racial dichotomy in the United States, their transcultural haiku attest to the ever-growing colors and forms of the songs being sung by African American poets on the world stage.

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